

NILSSON



A NOVEL
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INTRODUCTION

WHEN you had already crossed the Great Ice Region, Oh Traveller, and were intent on exploring the source of the Siatang River, you first came on an enormous pass flung by the forces of nature to a height of five and a half kilometres above sea level. Standing on the steep and frozen edge of this pass and looking south over the abyss, you saw the sharp pinnacles of massed mountains receding in parallel ranges. Jagged, grey, rocky, rising in almost vertical planes, they faded into the blue distance like the spines of colossal dragons lying motionless in eternal sleep. The canyons by which they were fissured were equally endless and receding, and the impression you received was of a wild, lost world, lacking the faintest sign of life. Only the thin clouds curling above the icy summits bore witness to the fact that change and movement existed even in this primordial world. And on catching sight of a vulture planing in the spaces below, you were struck by the fancy that this huge living bird circling above the chaos of the ancient moraine represented a violation of the laws of nature.

On turning to the map, you found that neither the Great Ice Region nor the sources of the rivers within sight were to be found there. Instead of exact geographical indications, you read only two intriguing words, "Unexplored Territory." Only when you were convinced of the impossibility of proceeding further did you cease your guessing as to which of the canyons of the High Mountains was called the Siatang River Canyon.

Turning back, you continued northward, wandering for a whole week through a wilderness of snows and glaciers in search of a way out, gasping in the rare air, forcing yourself by an extreme act of will to retain faith in your strength and

ability to emerge from this fearful wasteland. For two weeks thereafter you continued descending on horseback to those hot and fertile valleys where industrious Soviet people are peacefully engaged in the cultivation of cotton.

And when you were asked about the land of Siatang you replied that you knew nothing about it, though it had lain before you as in the palm of your hand. And you added that, judging by the map, one could penetrate that country only by a roundabout route, travelling hundreds of kilometres through the uplands of the Eastern Valleys until reaching the Great Border River, then descending a narrow path to the point at which the Siatang flows into this river. In such a way a month and a half of wandering would lead to the Siatang River Canyon from below, rather than from above.

But after a moment's thought you further added, "It seems that none of our explorers have ever entered the Canyon from that side either."

Regardless of references to this river to be found in chronicles of the past, and of all that is known to modern investigators, the fact remains that the Siatang River, like other rivers flowing parallel with it, takes its source among glaciers, and descends through a canyon which its waters have cleaved during the course of thousands of years. It affords existence to a small highland people speaking the Siatang dialect, boasting an eventful history, and now, along with all the other peoples of the vast Soviet land, embarking on the new life ushered in by the Soviet Revolution.

For hundreds of miles beyond the ranges formed by the Siatang River Canyon stretch other ranges, similarly cleaved by canyons through which flow rivers like the Siatang.

On the rocky banks of one such river, far removed from all the world, nestles the tiny settlement of Duob, whose very existence was unknown until recently. The inhabitants of this settlement speak the Siatang dialect.





CHAPTER ONE

1

OF COURSE Rozia-Mo should never have accepted the proposition of Mir-Ali. But on coming to the little, cliff-bound village of Duob, he had spoken to her so graciously and been so enthusiastic in trying to convince her, that she had finally consented. And indeed, what else could she do? Since the death of her husband all her strength had been exhausted in the effort to feed herself and her little Nisso, and still they were hungry. Mir-Ali had said to her: "All summer you will work in Yakhbar for Aziz-khon himself, and in the autumn he will give you a sheep and so much flour that on returning to Duob you will spend the winter as secure as though you had a rich, healthy husband." Rozia-Mo had discussed the matter with her sister Tura-Mo, and the latter had agreed to take care of little Nisso for the summer in exchange for half the earnings which Rozia-Mo would bring back with her in the autumn.

So Rozia-Mo blocked the entrance to her hut with a large stone, covered her face below the eyes with a white kerchief, and set out in advance of the donkey on which Mir-Ali rode out of the village. No one saw Rozia-Mo off; the inhabitants of Duob were little interested in her fate, while Tura-Mo had gone to the Upper Pasture before dawn. Rozia-Mo walked along the narrow, rocky path cut into the side of the cliff. Mir-Ali rode silently behind, glancing occasionally into the river which flung its spray at the foot of the precipice. As they approached the entrance to a narrow pass, Rozia-Mo turned for a last look at her native village, but on meeting the stern glance of Mir-Ali, she continued on her way with downcast eyes.

She tried to imagine the life she would lead there in Yakhbar, on the banks of the Great Border River. Rozia-Mo knew nothing about the land of Yakhbar, but from various neighbours she had heard much about its ruler, Aziz-khon. They had often spoken of his wealth and his power and authority. But when she thought of what awaited her there Rozia-Mo was filled with vague apprehensions.

As the narrow path widened out, Rozia-Mo saw two horses browsing on a tiny plot of grass, and a boy sitting beside a rock. Mir-Ali ordered Rozia-Mo to mount one of the horses while he mounted the other, and after handing over the donkey to the boy, they continued on their way.

Toward evening as the travellers were descending a rocky stretch leading to the river they met a group of horsemen, among whom Rozia-Mo recognized the hated Alim-Sho. She instantly realized that Mir-Ali had deceived her, and that if Alim-Sho should overtake her here, she never again would see her native village or her daughter Nisso.

It was this Alim-Sho who had once come to Duob to make her his wife, and had gone away infuriated by her refusal. It was he who a year later had fallen upon her husband along the road to the Upper Pasture and had so pelted him with rocks that he had never fully recovered. It was Alim-Sho who, after the death of her husband, had come once more to Duob to make her his wife, and when Rozia-Mo had publicly spat in his face he had left more infuriated than ever. Now he was riding toward her on his Yakhbarian horse and smiling as though nothing had ever happened. . . .

In the extremity of her fear, Rozia-Mo quickly glanced about her: old Mir-Ali was riding behind, cutting off the road to retreat; on the right rose an unscalable cliff; on the left roared the river. A path similar to the one they were following rose from the opposite bank of the river, and no one was to be seen on this path. Had Rozia-Mo considered the matter soberly she would have realized that wherever she fled, Alim-Sho's horsemen would overtake her. Even if she managed to reach the village, no one would offer her refuge. But there was no time to consider, and blind despair made her turn her horse to the river. The eager, intelligent beast plunged in, unintimidated by the rushing waters whose roar

drowned out the angry shouts of Alim-Sho and his companions. They also plunged into the river, but the woman managed to reach the opposite bank before them.

Rozia-Mo lashed her horse into a gallop over a path which any sane person would have taken only at a careful walk. She was oblivious of the men's shouting, and not once did she glance around. In her panic she thought only of urging her horse ahead as fast as possible. And the inevitable happened. At a sharp turn in the narrow path, an overhanging rock knocked her out of the saddle. Her fractured leg caught in the stirrup and Rozia-Mo was dragged over the stones until the frightened horse came to a halt. When Alim-Sho cautiously rounded the bend in the road he saw that Rozia-Mo was dead. He bent over her, biting his lips and wiping his moist forehead on his sleeve as he touched her broken, bloody body and muttered a prayer. When his companions rode up they dismounted and stood silent over Rozia-Mo without glancing at each other.

After performing the rites demanded of orthodox Shiites, they threw the body of Rozia-Mo into the river, took her horse and proceeded to the domain of Aziz-khon, never again to return to that canyon. Mir-Ali, bribed servant of Aziz-khon, went back to his master determined that his tongue should never tell what his eyes had seen that evening.

Some days later an old shepherd who was returning to the village found what death and the river had left of the once strong and lovely Rozia-Mo. Tura-Mo and some of the village women held a funeral at the rock on the riverbank where the body had been found, but no one ever discovered the true cause of the death of Rozia-Mo.

After that the elders gathered and decided that little Nisso should remain with Tura-Mo. The latter protested angrily, but since none of her excuses were accepted by the elders, she was forced to abide by their decision. "All of us are poor," they said. "No one wants an extra mouth to feed. None of us has anything but dried herbs to live on during the winter. But Rozia-Mo was your sister and you must raise her child."

So Nisso remained with her aunt.

Had Zenat-Sho been at home, he would probably have calmed Tura-Mo's fears by saying, "Even a dog will feed a strange puppy which is thrust upon it; the girl will eat what we ourselves eat. And in time, she will be a help about the house. An extra pair of hands will not be amiss."

But Zenat-Sho was too softhearted; he was always thinking of others and forgetting himself. After all, the child could not run about the village naked all her life—some time or other she would need a shirt on her back. And who could foresee all the other things she would need before she grew up? . . . But Zenat-Sho was not at home, and no one knew when he would return. Two years had passed since he had crossed the High Mountains in the hope of earning some money. No one knew whether he was alive or dead.

Tura-Mo took a handful of dried mulberries out of the sack, scattered them on a flat piece of slate and ground them into flour with a round stone. Then she poured this flour into a wooden bowl and repeated the process with another handful of mulberries. . . .

Tura-Mo's homespun dress was dirty and full of holes through which her sun-tanned body could be seen. She was thin, but her arms were strong and well developed. With rhythmic movements she ground up the dry mulberries of the preceding summer. The unruly black braids which she had plaited into her hair were forever getting in her way, and she kept thrusting them back with a quick movement of her bare elbow. All the women of the High Mountains adorned themselves with such braids made of goat's hair. Tura-Mo's braids were black. They had been black for a long time now. Tura-Mo would have given anything to regain the right to wear the red braids of an unmarried girl. But the time for that had long since passed. Tura-Mo already had two children and must think only of them. There had been a third, but it had died of smallpox. And its death could scarcely be regretted; birds and sheep and even snakes could eat to their heart's content and do what they pleased without the slightest care. But of what good was youth to her—Tura-Mo—when she could not fulfil even her slightest wish?

Things could not go on like this. As though a lone woman

could feed her own two children, let alone somebody else's child! If Zenat-Sho were dead, there was no reason why she should go on waiting for him. On the contrary, she should begin thinking about another husband. If he were alive, he had only himself to blame for not returning sooner. What if her neighbour, Bonday-Sho, was simple-minded and had a goiter? There were no healthy single men waiting for poor women like Tura-Mo. More and more frequently Bonday-Sho kept coming into her yard and asking, "Has my kid by any chance wandered over here?" Of course he had no kid. He had nothing at all except a skinny, mangy donkey. But Tura-Mo pretended not to know this, and kept replying, "I have not seen it. I think it is not here." But after all, she was young and her body was bursting with life like ripe grain. More and more often she was inclined to answer, "Go have a look, Bonday-Sho. Something flashed by when I went to the ditch for water. Maybe your kid has made its way into my house. . . ."

Bonday-Sho had a muscular chest and strong arms; he sang strange songs in a fine voice; he tramped to other villages and always returned with mutton fat, dried meat and a sack of apricot pits or mulberries. The goiter? What was a goiter? As though anyone here paid any attention to a goiter. Hassof also had a goiter, but that did not prevent his finding a pretty young wife. Hushvakt-Zoda and Mahmud and Hudai-Nazor all had goiters, but they also had wives and homes and mulberry trees, and nobody considered them any different from other men. Bonday-Sho could sow as well as anybody else, and he could till the soil and pasture cattle and let water into the irrigation ditch. Perhaps it was true that Bonday-Sho was possessed of an evil spirit. Probably it was the *dev** in him trying to get free that made him sometimes roll on the ground and roar and rage and spit at everything. But this did not often happen; for the most part, Bonday-Sho was cheerful and carefree. In fact he was more cheerful than most of the other men. But apparently he was too stingy to make Barad-bek a present, in exchange for which Barad-bek would give him an amulet to cure him of his fits. If Bonday-Sho should ever find his kid in her house, she would make him buy such an amulet!

* Dev—A demon or spirit, usually an evil spirit.

The accursed wind! It chilled her very bones. It seemed as though those clouds would never disperse above the narrow canyon. All winter long they kept moving away from the frozen peaks from which the river took its source. Nisso knew little about the world, but she was sure that when all the clouds had passed away the sun would shine, a warm breeze would blow and life would become more tolerable.

If only the water would stop trickling through that crack in the bottom of the jar! Nisso held her fingers over it, but the water kept on running down her arm, over her face and neck to her bare shoulders, where it froze in the icy wind. The ice pricked and burned her shoulders, but she could not take her hands off the jar. With chattering teeth and shivering body she made her way over the rocks, taking care not to slip. At last she was on the steep path leading to her house. This road was much longer, but with her full water jar she could not climb up the cliff where the little fields dotted the ledges.

Had Rozia-Mo been alive she would no doubt have gone for the water herself during the winter, like all the other women in the village. But Tura-Mo had other things on her mind. She was not at all interested in the fate of this child who was not even her own. Where, for instance, had Tura-Mo gone today? Having briefly ordered the children to sit quiet, she had disappeared for the whole day. But if the truth be told, Nisso knew very well where her aunt spent her time. Of course she was with Bonday-Sho, who never did anything but loll on a goat skin and twang the two strings of his lute. Every day Tura-Mo went to his house. They locked the door and were not seen in the village again for the rest of the day.

Frozen as she was, little Nisso wanted nothing so much as to reach home, but she could not run up the hill with the jar. She could only try to hasten her steps, breathing heavily through clenched teeth.

The stone hovels of the village were black. Each was surrounded by an empty yard behind a stone wall. There were no streets in Duob—only narrow, winding pathways between the stone walls in which two donkeys would have difficulty passing each other. The icy mountain wind had swept the village clean. Only in the most sheltered corners behind large rocks did the snowdrifts remain. None of the inhabit-

ants were to be seen, for who would want to go out in that wind, and what was there to do out of doors in the winter time? All who still had a supply of mulberry flour and dried apples had no need to leave their huts—somehow or other, they would hold out until spring!

The icy water kept trickling down and freezing on Nisso's shoulders and breast. But at last she reached home with her jar still half full of water. Nisso entered the house and cast a glance at Zaybo and Medgzid who were sitting in a corner rolling a sheep bone over the floor. With stiff hands she poured water into the iron pot puttied into the hearth. Then she hopped about the room, rubbing her numb body and biting off the ice crust which had formed on her arms.

"Nisso, I am hungry. Give me something to eat," wailed six-year-old Medgzid tearfully, grabbing at the bone which Zaybo was holding in her clenched fist.

Zaybo was loath to part with her toy, so that Medgzid had to bend back her fingers, at which Zaybo tried to bite him and began to cry.

"Be still! I too am hungry. I have to go for the greens yet! Leave Zaybo alone, you little brat! Leave her alone I tell you!" repeated Nisso, giving Medgzid a cuffing. "Sit quiet while I go for some fire!"

The only person who had matches in Duob was the respected Barad-bek. The inhabitants did not have even enough brushwood to keep a constant fire going. For that reason they took turns retaining a fire. Nisso picked up a clay bowl and ran out of the house, returning in a few minutes with the bowl pressed against her hollow stomach.

Carefully she lifted the live coals and placed them under the dried manure she had previously laid on the hearth. Then she shielded the coals with her hands and blew until her head was enveloped in pungent blue smoke.

Once more Medgzid and Zaybo were playing with their bone.

"See that the fire does not go out!" said Nisso brusquely to Medgzid as she once more disappeared through the door.

The fierce wind flung snow into her flushed face. Nisso ran through the village, jumping from rock to rock.

She was anxiously figuring where she might be able to

find some more of the herbs called "schorsk" in the ravine above Duob.

Soon the village was far below her. Up in the ravine a mountain stream murmured under the snow. Large rocks were scattered along its banks, and here and there dry bushes stuck out of the snow around the rocks.

But today there were no herbs under the boulder where she had found them yesterday. Somebody had been here before her, as she could see by the trampled snow. Ah, it had been the donkey belonging to Barad-bek. The prints in the snow could be only his. Nisso unfailingly recognized the footprints of every animal in Duob (as though there were many of them!). And the donkey had gobbled up all the greens, the tramp! All the greens that could be stewed into something for humans to eat! Maybe there were still some left behind those rocks over there where the snow remained undisturbed.

Nisso made her way around the boulders and began digging in the snow with her bare feet. She found nothing but stones. She moved to another place, but stepped on a bush which left its thorns in her foot. Dropping down in the snow, she angrily pulled them out and smeared off the blood while her eyes kept roving in search of herbs. Perhaps there were some over there—or there? The situation was becoming desperate. Every day there was less grass to be found in the ravine, and soon she would probably have to go beyond the Pass. But she would freeze if she had to go so far.

At last Nisso caught sight of some familiar leaves peeking out from under a stone. Quickly—this time with her hands—she dug away the snow, and tore up the yellowed herbs. She should have gathered enough for several days, but her hands were too stiff with cold. Home, home! As fast as possible! Nisso had not yet learned to think of the morrow; she lived only for today. Without bothering to scatter snow on the remaining herbs, she rushed down the ravine, clutching the bunch of frozen greens to her breast.

At home the water was already boiling, and Nisso dumped in all that she had brought. Then she stripped off her cold garment and sat down by the fire, stretching toward it first a hand, then a foot. Gradually her body warmed and she stopped shivering.

The greens had to be boiled for a long time. Nisso watched them cooking idly, but her mouth was watering so that it made her yawn as she stirred the pot with a long wooden spoon. Medgzid and Zaybo left their game to stare greedily at the brew. When he could bear it no longer, Medgzid made an attempt to stick his finger into the pot, but Nisso struck his hand sharply. He pulled it back and continued to gaze at the greens whirling in the boiling water as though nothing had happened.

At last the food was ready. Nisso should have put out the fire, for every bit of manure for fuel was worth its weight in gold. But she kept putting it off, so pleasant was the warmth rising from the hearth. The fire stayed off the frost trying to slip through the cracks between the rocks of the walls. Nisso thrust the wooden spoon into the hands of Zaybo:

"Go ahead and eat!"

Zaybo grasped the spoon in both hands and fished around in the pot to catch as many of the greens as possible.

"Hurry up!" said Nisso, and Zaybo gobbled down her portion so fast that she scalded her throat.

Nisso then handed the spoon to Medgzid and sat waiting for her turn. The wind made its way through the walls of the dwelling, chilling Nisso's back, but her chest and stomach were glowing with heat. A bit of goat skin wrapped around five-year-old Zaybo and tied together by a bit of string made her look like a little monkey. Medgzid's body and legs were bundled in sacking. The spoon passed from hand to hand and they ate silently and greedily. Their stomachs were swollen, the greens were consumed, but a quantity of dark hot water still remained.

The home of Tura-Mo was in no way distinguished from the other homes of this little village. Wide clay benches extended around the crudely constructed stone walls. These benches were divided into sections by partitions forming separate compartments in the corners. In Tura-Mo's more prosperous years these corners had served as storerooms for flour, hay, and straw, and warm places for yearning the sheep. Then the shelves had been piled high with wooden bowls of sour milk, goat's cheese and millet cakes. Now these compartments were empty: Tura-Mo owned not even a blanket to cover her bones at night.

A stall for the cow was partitioned off to the left of the entrance. Tura-Mo's cow was still alive, but so thin and wasted that it no longer supplied them even with manure, to say nothing of milk. And how could it be otherwise when for so long a time it had been fed only on the dried mulberry leaves which the merchant Barad-bek consented to give Tura-Mo on credit? If he should refuse her this, it would be necessary to kill the cow for meat, but Tura-Mo would sooner consent to cutting off her own hand than to being deprived of her cow. Nisso and the cow were good friends. Usually Nisso slept with the cow, rolling herself up into a ball and cuddling up to the animal for warmth. Medgzid and Zaybo nestled against Tura-Mo, who covered herself with two sacks and lay down on the bench next to the hearth where faint remnants of warmth lingered throughout the night. There was no room near the hearth for Nisso, but she was just as well pleased. It was much more restful to sleep with the cow, which had become used to the child and never kicked or rolled over on her. The cow was called "Blue Horn," but her horns were not at all blue. They were very small, and the cow itself was black with a white forehead. Nisso knew that Blue Horn was a very well-intentioned and affectionate beast, but often she was startled awake by having her face licked by Blue Horn's rough tongue. It seemed that the cow must have found something very tasty to lick, but actually it was just being affectionate. Nisso loved the cow—probably the only creature in the world which she loved. Today, for instance, Nisso had kept two bunches of grass for Blue Horn. As soon as she had finished gulping down the water from the greens she would take the grass to the cow and lie down beside it, listening to the gurgling of the beast's empty stomach and the grinding of its worn, flat teeth. . . .

Pungent smoke filled the room when Nisso smothered the fire with a round stone. Medgzid and Zaybo had already curled up like kittens and were sound asleep. Nisso pulled them to one side so that they would not fall into the hearth in their sleep. Then she took the herbs from under her dress drying at the fire and made her way, naked as before, to the partition behind which Blue Horn was waiting for her.

But at that moment Tura-Mo entered the hut in an amazingly happy frame of mind. Her long white tunic, under

which she wore nothing but trousers, was powdered with snow. Her braids were disheveled. The key to the storeroom (which Nisso knew had been empty for some time) was swinging from the end of one of Tura-Mo's false braids. There was something unusual about her aunt's swarthy face and large dark eyes today. Tura-Mo was smiling. It was amazing that Tura-Mo should smile. Nisso could not remember that this had ever happened before. How queer her aunt's eyes were at present—so keen and bright and smiling! Nisso tried to slip behind the partition, but Tura-Mo pushed her back to the hearth. Nisso sat down silently, dropping her eyes and hiding Blue Horn's herbs under her dress. But Tura-Mo seemed to pay no attention to Nisso. Turning away, she placed her hands under her braids, half closed her eyes, and began to glide back and forth across the room. Nisso began to watch her aunt's strange behaviour from out of the corner of her eye. Ordinarily Tura-Mo would come home, take her seat by the hearth, and after first fondling Zaybo or slapping Medgzid or Nisso, would begin to eat in a preoccupied manner, after which she would sit motionless with tight lips—always gloomy and unapproachable.

But today she was different. She moved as though she were dancing, with light steps, eyes raised to the ceiling and lips smiling. As Nisso watched her she wondered if it would not be better to escape to the cow. But she was afraid to attract her aunt's attention. She dared not move for the present.

Suddenly Tura-Mo began to sing a song without words—only a long-drawn "a-a-ah!" She kept singing and moving about as though she had gone mad. And her movements became faster and faster, turning into a dance, with her braids swinging out and her ragged tunic undulating about her lean, supple body. Never before had her aunt sung like this, and Nisso was filled with alarm. What would happen next?

Suddenly Tura-Mo stopped and sat down on the bench next to Nisso, embracing the child and looking into her eyes. Tura-Mo's face was happy and excited. She drew something pink out of her bosom and handed it to Nisso with the words, "Here, silly, eat it!"

It was a piece of pink rock salt, a delicacy which Nisso had not seen for a long time. She glanced at it cautiously without daring to take it.

"Eat it," repeated Tura-Mo with a laugh, pushing the salt into Nisso's mouth.

Nisso was conscious of a pleasant flavour, but she was still afraid. The affection in her aunt's eyes was so unusual that Nisso's fears grew with every moment.

Tura-Mo embraced Nisso and began to sway with her from side to side. Again she half closed her eyes and began wailing between her teeth, "A-a-ah!" Nisso trembled. Tura-Mo continued to sway back and forth, but more and more slowly. At last she became still. Her arms relaxed. Thinking that her aunt had fallen asleep, Nisso cautiously attempted to free herself from her embrace.

But immediately Tura-Mo opened her eyes and looked at Nisso with a different expression—the usual cold, cruel stare—as she roughly pushed the child away. Nisso jumped up.

"Where are you going?" shouted Tura-Mo, and Nisso stopped. Now her aunt began to nag Nisso in her usual tone of irritation. "Boiled the greens? Where is the fire? Why is there nothing but water left in the pot? Hanging around doing nothing all day, lazy bones!"

Nisso stood there naked as a statue, hanging her head. In her hands she held the dress in which two bunches of herbs were hidden.

"Answer me!"

"I boiled them," answered Nisso softly.

"So you have had your fill and left nothing for me? I can go hungry for all you care! What is that in your hands? Why did you not boil that up?"

"I saved it for Blue Horn," said Nisso in a scarcely audible voice.

"So that is how it is!" shouted Tura-Mo in a rage. "You think of the cow, but your aunt can go to the devil? Perhaps you think I feed you and clothe you and keep you here for nothing, curse you! You thankless wretch! I shall turn you out in the snow, and you can find yourself a home with the wolves! Get out now, and bring me some fire! And give me those herbs!"

Snatching them out of Nisso's hands, Tura-Mo flung them angrily into the pot. Nisso bit her lips and moved silently toward the door. She slipped out into the biting wind, pulled

on her shirt, and walked slowly to the neighbouring hut to ask for coals.

That night, as Nisso slept snuggled against the hairy hide of the cow, she was awakened by the sound of sobbing. Nisso listened. Her aunt was crying aloud in the darkness. She would become silent and then once more burst into tears. Finally she was joined by the frightened, piercing wail of Zaybo. Her aunt stopped crying and began to soothe her daughter in muffled tones. Blue Horn turned its head, pushed a moist nose against Nisso's body, and sighed the deep, long-drawn sigh of a cow, bathing Nisso in a stream of warm air. Nisso nestled closer to the cow and stared into the darkness, wondering what could be the cause of her aunt's strange merriment during the day and of her weeping at night. The cow licked Nisso's back and turned her head away. Through the cracks in the walls the wind whistled as though it were possessed by all the demons of the mountains.

4

"I am leaving," said Bonday-Sho. "Are you coming along?"

"No, I am not. Someone has to clear away the stones. Someone has to work."

Bitter lines had formed about Tura-Mo's mouth; they had not been there the preceding year.

"Who wants your old *patuk*?* It makes you bow-legged. Come along with me."

"No. Better to be bow-legged than starve to death."

"What you need is a merry life, but you refuse to come with me. . . . Well, I am going."

"Go ahead. Will you bring something back?"

"To be sure."

Bonday-Sho left with a ragged robe on his bare body, a lute in his hands, and an empty goat skin over his shoulders. He could not cross the river without the goat skin, and the river had to be crossed in many places. That is how he left.

Now he was going down the path: broad shoulders, shaved head, goiter reaching to his right shoulder.

* *Patuk*—A sort of pea peculiar to the Pamirs.

Now his brown figure was far below at the river's edge. He was blowing up the goat skin.

Now he was raising his robe to his shoulders, placing the skin under his belly and entering the water.

Now he was floating down the foaming stream, moving his arms and legs.

Now he had disappeared behind the cliff. . . .

It was spring in the canyon. The sun was hot, but the wind was still tinged with the breath of the glaciers. Above the canyon rose blinding snows with which no sun could cope.

Bonday-Sho was gone for a whole week, and Tura-Mo became her old self during his absence. She cleared three ledges of stones. During the winter, the earth which they had brought in wooden bowls had settled down to form a hard crust. For long morning hours Tura-Mo laboured with the donkey belonging in Bonday-Sho. Two straps of rawhide were fastened to a pair of goat's horns serving as a plow. One strap was pulled by the donkey, the other was around Tura-Mo, while a large rock was placed on the "plow" to make it move more evenly.

Men were working the other fields. Of course plowing was not woman's work. But if no one helped Tura-Mo, no one laughed at her. They all knew that she was alone, and that Bonday-Sho was possessed of devils. If it was patuk she was sowing, that was because she had nothing else to sow. The respected Barad-bek would not give her millet or barley on credit. And even if it did make you bow-legged, patuk gave an abundant harvest—fifteen times the amount of seed sown. And it grew almost on the bare rocks. Of course Tura-Mo was crazy to sow nothing but patuk. She should have mixed it with peas. If mixed in this way you could eat patuk flour for a whole month without becoming ill. After that, of course, the tendons of your knees would constrict, your bones would begin to ache and pain, and your legs would bend under you like a sickle. But Tura-Mo would take no one's advice. She continued to sow her green seed and ignore her neighbours. Well, everyone does as he sees fit, and when one has nothing else to eat, he is glad to eat patuk.

Bonday-Sho was gone for a whole week, and for a whole week Tura-Mo spoke to no one. She would only snap orders at

Nisso: "Bring some water," "Give me a stone," "Drive off the donkey." As though that were speaking! Nisso did everything Tura-Mo ordered her to and was more silent than ever. Even the donkey raised its voice in protest. Sometimes it would bray so loudly that it could be heard throughout Duob. And when it got a stubborn spell on, you could beat it with a whip and throw stones at it and pull its ears, but it would not budge. Nisso never argued with her aunt. She would remain as silent as though she had been born without a tongue. But apparently she was glad that Bonday-Sho had gone away. At least her aunt was always in the same gloomy and savage mood now. Nothing could be worse than the days when she laughed and danced and acted as though she were drunk. Until that winter her aunt had never had such spells, but now they became more and more frequent. Whenever she spent the day with Bonday-Sho she would return with her eyes burning, her words tumbling out of her mouth without any sense, her merrymaking alternating so sharply with fits of fury that she must surely be possessed. Then when she was alone, Tura-Mo would claw at her face and sob the whole night. This was so terrifying that Nisso would have preferred having her aunt beat her. For several days following each spell, Tura-Mo could not eat or work, and hardly resembled a human being. How much better it would be if Bonday-Sho did not return at all!

But he returned on the eighth day. Nisso caught sight of him when he was still far away. He was climbing up the narrow path leading from the river with a heavy sack on his back. Nisso glanced up to where her aunt was clearing the fourth ledge of stones, and she saw Tura-Mo drop her work and run to meet Bonday-Sho. They met at the entrance to his hut. Tura-Mo asked him something, and he replied by shaking a full little sack which he held in his hand. Then they entered the hut. Nisso supposed that Bonday-Sho had brought back food—perhaps some boiled goat's meat or some millet cakes. He always brought back food. And she also supposed that they would eat everything up themselves. Nisso stole from rock to rock, stealthily approaching the hut of Bonday-Sho from the rear.

Like all the other houses in Duob, that of Bonday-Sho had a flat roof and no windows. There was no means of looking

into the house from the ground. So she braced herself against a mulberry tree growing close to the wall and climbed lithely up the stones of the wall onto the clay roof, from where she made her way to the smoke hole. She knew very well that things would not be very pleasant for her if either her aunt or Bonday-Sho should discover her, but she also knew that she would be able to slip away in time. From that vantage point she could hear their conversation:

"They were sitting in a circle and drinking tea. Such tea! With lots of salt and milk and mutton fat in it: I could smell it, and I never remember drinking such tea! Aziz-khon promised to treat all of us if we amused him. . . ."

"Who else was there?" asked her aunt.

"Many people. . . . Some from our parts—from Siatang and Zarkhok—and some from other parts. Do I know the names of all the villages? Lots of people I tell you. A big celebration. Many people like me also came—at least forty. The mutton was stewed in big pots. I said to myself, 'I shall be the jolliest of all, or else Aziz-khon will give me nothing.' All the old men sitting there asked me why Barad-bek had not come. 'Our Barad-bek has sore eyes,' I said. Maybe his eyes really are sore."

"He gave me eight *tubeteikas** full of patuk seed."

"What did he say?"

"He said, 'Pay me in milk.'"

"Did he give you some peas?"

"Of course not. Why should he? I sowed only patuk."

"Aziz-khon gave me peas—look, half a sackful. We shall plant them and have good flour."

"Why did he give them to you?"

"That is a very funny story. A new game which Aziz-khon made up. They turned a sheepskin inside-out and dressed me up in it. On my back they put a stone for a hump. In my hands they put a staff. A very dottering old man I turned out to be. They dressed up Zogar like a woman. They covered his face with a white kerchief and even tied woolen braids to his head. So I made love to 'her' and 'she' chased me away. I acted very well. They laughed so hard they nearly burst their bellies."

* *Tubeteika*—An embroidered oriental skullcap.

"Where did you get the meat?"

"The meat? The horsemen of the *ressaldar** gathered there. They were playing a game with a goat."

"Was the *ressaldar* himself there?"

"No he was not. He is not on good terms with the Khan. They were playing with the goat. Each wanted to show his prowess by being the first to throw the goat at the feet of Aziz-khon. Ho! I thought they would tear each other apart! Nothing remained of the goat but a tattered sack. This they tossed to the dogs. But I and some others snatched it away from the dogs and stewed it. Then that wretched boy Zogar, snakish favourite of the Khan, complained to Aziz-khon who then drove me away. But I kept the meat all the same!"

"The meat is good, so nothing else matters. Did you bring much of the other?"

"There, you can see how much."

Nisso held her breath and listened, filled with curiosity as to what they were referring to now. She glanced down through the smoke hole. Tura-Mo was sitting at the fire with her arm about Bonday-Sho. She was holding a large piece of stewed goat's meat in one hand, and on seeing the meat Nisso was so overwhelmed by hunger that she forgot all caution. She moved closer to get a better smell of the delicious food, and in so doing knocked off a piece of clay which fell down onto the iron pot with a sharp ring. Nisso jumped back, crawled to the edge of the roof, grabbed hold of a branch, slid down onto the ground and made herself scarce.

Bonday-Sho and Tura-Mo remained inside his hut all day long. Field work was forgotten. In the evening Nisso once more stole over to Bonday-Sho's hut and heard Tura-Mo singing hoarsely.

"Again!" said Nisso to herself. "She is beginning all over again!"

In the morning the villagers were to drive their cows and sheep to the Upper Pasture where they would remain to graze for the entire summer. Blue Horn was to have been included in the herd, and since Nisso took care of the cow, the child had awaited this day impatiently. She remembered the preced-

* *Ressaldar*—Khan's cavalry leader.

ing summer spent in the Upper Pasture. It had been splendid. All day long she had herded the cow among the luscious grass and in the evening had joined the other girls and women in making sour cheese. There was no aunt there, no one to nag her, no one to strike her, and if sometimes the women shouted at her, she did not mind. They were no kin of hers.

She wondered whether her aunt would return home by morning. She wondered whether Tura-Mo would send her to the Upper Pasture. Of course she could not go to the Upper Pasture with the others tomorrow without her aunt's consent.

All night Nisso lay awake wondering and worrying. Most of all she worried about whether they would eat up all the goat's meat themselves. Nisso bit her lips and rubbed her stomach with hunger, but nothing helped. In the evening Medgzig and Zaybo had eaten their fill of patuk seeds, and now they were sleeping soundly. But Nisso was afraid to eat patuk. All the girls said you must not eat it. Nisso did not want her legs to bow under her. She had neither mother nor father. Who would take care of her if she became ill? During the night Nisso's patience became exhausted. It was impossible that Tura-Mo and Bonday-Sho should remain awake all night, and if they were asleep. . . .

Nisso had no particular plan of action; she was merely lured from the house by an overpowering hunger. After first stroking the flank of the sleeping cow, she slipped through the door. If only the neighbour's dog would not bark at her! Her bare feet stepped lightly over the stones without disturbing them. She climbed one stone fence and then another. The night was dark and moonless, but Nisso knew every pebble in the road. Here was the entrance to Bonday-Sho's hut. She heard loud breathing to the right of the entrance and drew back motionless against the wall. It was the donkey. Of course they had forgotten all about the donkey, and the beast had returned alone from the fields in the evening. They were sleeping. She could hear Bonday-Sho snoring lightly, but no sound came from her aunt. If only she did not stumble over her! With a loud rustle, the donkey turned toward Nisso, and again the child froze in her tracks with beating heart. But she forced herself to stretch out her hand and pat the donkey. How dreadful if it should bray! But the donkey

recognized her and silently licked her hand with its rough tongue. Nisso dropped to her knees and crawled inside the hut, where she crouched in silence. When her breathing became more calm she began to cautiously sniff the air for the odour of meat. But she became conscious of another odour, one which was sharp and spicy and made her want to sneeze. She dared not sneeze! Everything in the room was saturated with this odour, which in no way resembled that of food. What had they been burning here? Nisso was mortally afraid of sneezing if she remained in the hut any longer, but hunger dominated her fear. Forgetting all care, she crept up to the hearth and stretched out her hand. It fell on a wooden bowl in which lay a large bone with meat on it. Nisso's heart beat wildly; the bone was already in her hand. She backed to the door, turned around, and fled out of the hut. No one in the room had stirred, but Nisso kept running on and on, unmindful of the path, lacerating her feet on the rocks, holding the piece of goat's meat so tightly between her teeth that nothing in the world could have torn it away from her. Scaling one wall, then a second, she struck against a rock and fell down. The jar was painful, but she paid no attention to the pain. She remained lying where she had fallen, and sank her teeth greedily into the meat which she clutched in both hands, rending it apart and swallowing it down unchewed. Soon she began to eat more slowly, no longer swallowing down whole chunks. Her little jaws worked with amazing speed. Gradually she had her fill and assumed a more comfortable position on the rock. She had consumed half of the meat and wanted no more. Thoughts of Medgzid and Zaybo entered her mind—maybe she should go home, wake them up and give them each a piece. Of course she should give them some, only not all—just a little bit. Maybe she need not give them any. If there was more meat, surely her aunt would bring it to them in the morning. She always shared with them.

Thinking such thoughts, Nisso got up and slowly made her way back home. She entered the door. Blue Horn was sleeping. So were Medgzid and Zaybo. Of course it would be wrong to wake them up. Once they were sleeping, they must be feeling comfortable, and not at all hungry. They had eaten so many patuk seeds in the evening. The best thing to do would be to wait until morning. If Tura-Mo brought them

nothing, then she would give them each a piece. But what if they told her aunt that she had fed them goat's meat! That was a dreadful possibility. Oh no, it would be better to have Tura-Mo think that the neighbour's dog had stolen the bone. After all, it might have stolen it. And in fact, if Nisso should fall asleep now, the dog might come and eat up what she had left.

Nisso wondered where she should hide the meat. Perhaps out in the yard under a stone. But there the dog would surely scent it and dig it up. Perhaps here in the house. But her aunt might return while Nisso was sleeping. The best thing to do would be to remain awake all night holding the meat in her hands, and then eat it all up in the morning. Of course that would be the best thing to do!

Nisso made her way to the stall and sat down beside the cow. Holding the gnawed bone between her knees, she kept sitting there fighting off the desire to sleep, a desire made the more irresistible by the fact that Nisso for once was not hungry. Within a few minutes her head sank on her chest and her breathing became calm and even.

No one came to the hut even in the morning. As soon as Nisso woke up she began to search frantically for the meat. There it was on the floor beside her and Nisso ate it all up.

Already the mists of morning were rising from the canyon. Duob was all astir, for today the women were to drive the cattle to the Upper Pasture. But Tura-Mo was smoking opium with Bonday-Sho. She was in a different world—a shadowy, alien world. No one but Nisso gave her a thought. And no one gave a thought to Nisso and her bitter disappointment. The child sat motionless at the entrance to the hut watching the cattle meandering through the village. Out of the rosy mist appeared cows and goats and sheep tinkling their iron bells and disappearing once more in the mist. As though sensing her loneliness, Blue Horn kept mooing mournfully as it stretched its head over the enclosure and watched the other cattle going away.

Meanwhile the years passed—five, it seems, or even more. Like all the years before them, they passed without bringing any change to Duob. A few people died and were

buried quietly, without an excess of grief. A few children were born, and no one rejoiced at the fact. Everyone realized that people were like the stones—no matter how many you removed from the fields, they would always be replaced by those which fell down from the heights. There would always be people in the village, and they would always be hungry. And in this respect, Tura-Mo's home was no exception. As long as the children remained alive, they would continue to grow, no matter how difficult their life.

And Nisso's life continued in the same old way. She kept on filling her water jar at the river and boiling up greens and taking entire care of the household. The only difference was that to the remnants of her canvas shirt she had added a few pieces of a tattered sack, so that now her dress reached her knees.

No one helped Nisso. Medgzid, who was already eleven years old, could have done many of the household chores. But his main occupation was shooting stones from a sling-shot.

This was the favourite sport of all the little boys in Duob, but Medgzid was a particular enthusiast. He killed the birds fluttering in the mulberry trees and then ate them raw, like a cat. He shot at the girls from behind the rocks, and one day he struck Zaybo in the face with such a big stone that blood flowed from her lip and cheek, and her two front teeth were knocked out. Zaybo fell unconscious from the wall where she had been trying to reach the wild apples growing in a neighbour's yard. She was found by their neighbour Pavlavon-Nazar, a hunter and maker of shoes from goat hide.

Tura-Mo had not been in the village that day. Ever since she had begun to go to the valley of the Great River with Bonday-Sho she was rarely seen in Duob, and few of the villagers missed her. Pavlavon-Nazar was tall and lean and aloof, like a stone tower on the top of a mountain. He gave the impression of being a stern and even hard man, but actually he had a kind heart. He took Zaybo in his arms and carried her to Barad-bek, so that the latter could take counsel with god as to the best treatment for the child's injuries.

The staid grey-beard Barad-bek poked a hairy finger into Zaybo's bloody face and poured some sort of liquid

into her mouth which brought her to and made her cry. Then he hung a triangular amulet sewn into a prayer cloth about her neck for the purpose of protecting her from illness. Pavlavon-Nazar thanked Barad-hek, presented him with a fox skin in exchange for the amulet, and took Zaybo home with him, confident that she would immediately recover.

But within a few days the wounds on Zaybo's face became infected, her body burned with fever, her mouth swelled up, and she refused all food, even sour milk. Pavlavon-Nazar decided to sacrifice another fox skin and take her to the old woman Zebardor.

Zebardor melted some mutton fat, mixed it with the ashes obtained by burning bird droppings, added a pinch of ground roots, and covered Zaybo's face with a thick layer of this salve.

Within a few days Zaybo actually began to recover. She was seen running about the village with a frightening black face, but as carefree as all children of her age. In spite of Nisso's cuffings, Medgzid struck his sister as hard as usual when they quarreled.

Medgzid did not hide his hatred for Nisso. At every opportunity he would shout that she was an "illegal frog," who had better get out of his mother's house (where she lived on charity) before he paid her back for all her nagging. Nisso paid little attention to the boy's vicious shouts. She kept on about her work, trying in every way to find enough for them to eat.

Medgzid was deaf in the right ear, and he always swore that Nisso was to blame (one day she had in fact given him a particularly hard cuffing). Actually Medgzid's deafness had a different cause. A year before an insect of some sort had crawled into his ear and stung him. Tura-Mo had taken the boy to old Zebardor, who for three tubeteikafuls of mulberries had poured some hot liquid into his ear. The liquid had remained there and hardened, leaving the boy deaf. Medgzid remembered the circumstances very well, but it was more to his liking to accuse Nisso of causing his misfortune.

In general he could not resist making her life miserable. Once when Tura-Mo was back in the village for a week, he hid behind a rock and waited for Nisso to come from the

river with a full water jar on her head. When she appeared he took careful aim and his stone struck the very centre of the water jar, which fell in pieces, dousing Nisso from head to foot.

Nisso could not imagine why her jar had broken so suddenly. "The river dev must be angry with me," she thought fearfully. Tura-Mo gave her such a beating that Nisso crawled away to the cow's empty stall and remained lying there motionless. A twinge of conscience made Tura-Mo go to the stall during the night to make sure the girl was not dead. She was reassured by hearing Nisso moan in her sleep, and went back to the hearth.

The next day Tura-Mo and Bonday-Sho once more went into the valley of the Great River, for now neither of them could live without opium. Nisso's entire body ached when she got up in the morning, but in spite of the pain she went to Pavlavon-Nazar to borrow something in which to fetch water.

That morning Pavlavon-Nazar was smelting bullets for his gun. A wooden bowl filled with barley seed stood on a stone before him. He counted out eighteen seeds for each bullet so that they would all be the same weight, placed them in forms of his own making and skilfully covered them with lead obtained from the nomads in the Eastern Valley. Glancing up as Nisso entered shyly, he noticed the bruises about her eyes. With a sympathetic click of his tongue, he held out the bowl of barley seed and said, "Eat as much as you like. Has your aunt gone away?"

Nisso silently nodded as she stuffed a handful of seed into her mouth.

Pavlavon-Nazar watched her out of the corner of his eye, then got up, went over to the corner and brought back a piece of dried goat's meat which he handed to Nisso.

When she told him about the water jar and asked him trustingly why the river dev should have become so angry with her, he thought for a moment and then answered slowly:

"You ask me why the river dev should have become so angry with you? Your heart is still like an apricot without a pit in it. The dev was only jesting with you. I have two jars. You may take one of them."

Nisso was so overjoyed with her new jar that she rushed home, forgetting even to thank Pavlavon-Nazar.

Nisso's visible world was bounded by two ranges of rocky mountains towering above the canyon. A roaring mountain river flowed through the canyon, disappearing behind a tremendous overhanging cliff which cut off this world from the unknown. In its upper reaches, the river was visible for a great distance, even as far as the rapids formed by boulders massed in the river bed. At this point the view was intersected by a blue ridge, serving as background for the green of an isolated group of trees. Above the ridge and inconceivably far away towered the peaks of an unknown range. And still higher rose the Eternal Snows, ever gleaming in the sun and melting into the blue zenith in receding undulations. Cool breezes blew down from them in the summer, while in the winter they enveloped the world in clouds of snow and fog.

The village of Duob in which Nisso had been born clung to a slope which rose into a sheer cliff from which sharp stones were forever dropping down onto the fields and gardens below. Duob was bisected by a narrow ravine formed by a tributary of the river. In the winter this tributary was a narrow, murmuring rivulet; in the summer it became a dark frothing torrent, furiously licking at its steep banks and leaping in waterfalls over the boulders impeding its course. In the autumn, its waters became calm and purged, so that in still pools along the stepped descent they clearly reflected the sky and the bushes growing between the rocks and the figures of villagers making their way along the narrow river path to the Upper Pasture or back home to Duob.

Never in her life had Nisso been anywhere beyond her village except to the Upper Pasture. But as she grew older she became more and more curious as to what lay beyond her visible world—out there where, in one direction went Pavlavon-Nazar and other hunters, and where in the other direction went Bonday-Sho and Tura-Mo, following the river until they disappeared behind the cliff.

Formerly Bonday-Sho had always floated down the river on an inflated goat skin. Now he had five such skins; from four of them he made a float on which he seated Tura-Mo and the tethered donkey, while he himself swam on the

fifth, holding onto the float with one hand to steer it among the foaming waters. Nisso's aunt and Bonday-Sho always made the return journey on foot along the same path which once Rozia-Mo had travelled in the company of the unknown old man.

It seemed to Nisso that she could vaguely remember her mother, but actually she remembered nothing but the tales of Pavlavon-Nazar, who always told Nisso that her mother had been even prettier than Tura-Mo and much kinder. When thinking of her mother, Nisso confused her imagined appearance with the face of Pavlavon-Nazar. He was not at all handsome, and of course could not possibly have resembled Rozia-Mo, but he had kind eyes. Nisso had never been able to gaze directly and trustingly into any eyes other than those of Pavlavon-Nazar and Blue Horn, the cow. She always looked down or glanced in another direction when speaking with people, as though she were afraid of the evil which flowed from their gaze.

Blue Horn had long since ceased to be. Tura-Mo herself had led it off to Barad-bek to pay her debts and to receive two tubeteikafuls of opium. Barad-bek sold the cow to a stranger from the Lower Valleys. The stranger spoke a tongue resembling that of Siatang, so that everyone could understand him, but Nisso never found out who he was. The important thing was that Blue Horn never returned, nor did the stranger ever appear again in Duob.

Nisso cried bitterly when they led away the cow—the first time in her life she had ever cried. She kept running after it, hanging on to the beast and begging the stranger not to drive it away. But the man only smiled, patted Nisso on the shoulder and offered her something to eat wrapped in paper. Nisso threw the package in his face and bit his hand. At that the man became angry and struck her in the chest with his fist. She fell down, jumped up again, and tried to catch up with the cow, but the man threatened her with stones, so that she was forced to remain behind.

This took place on the other side of the overhanging cliff, at a spot where the path took a sharp upward turn. After that Nisso had often returned to the scene of her final parting with Blue Horn. She would sit on a rock and lose herself in sad meditation, as though listening to the soft steps of

the departing cow and catching a vision of its mournfully drooping tail with the white spot in the middle.

There on the narrow path beyond the overhanging cliff Nisso learned to dream and grieve. There was no opportunity for such indulgence in the village. Household duties demanded her constant attention. It never entered her mind that at home one could simply sit and do nothing or pass the time with one's neighbours or play with toys—the clay goats, woollen dolls, coloured stones and sticks covered with red and black dots which Pavlavon-Nazar made and gave to all the children in Duob. None of these toys held the slightest interest for Nisso. She could not understand how it was possible to spend the whole day playing with them, or how one could be sufficiently interested to quarrel over them.

6

The flat roof of the house belonging to the old hunter Pavlavon-Nazar was hot with sun. Nisso was sitting on this roof with her legs drawn up beneath her and her brown body glancing through the rents in her clothes. For a long time she had been carrying on a conversation with Pavlavon-Nazar almost like a grownup.

"And what other kinds of people are there, Nazar?"

"What other kinds? . . . Hm, hand me that needle over there, the one that is unthreaded," muttered Pavlavon-Nazar, gripping a strip of wet rawhide in his teeth as he stretched it out and twisted it between his fingers to form a leather thong. "What other kinds? Well, there are Russians...."

"Who are they?"

"People like us, only stronger and richer and more clever. They know how to make many things."

"Did they make that gun of yours?"

"No, it was made by Bokharians. I have already told you about them. Do you think the Russians would make guns like that? If I had their guns, I could kill ten goats a day!"

"Where do the Russians live?"

"Where do they live?" Placing the wet rawhide on a flat stone, Pavlavon-Nazar began to rub it with a round

pebble. "There are many of them. Who knows where they all live? Over there," said Pavlavon-Nazar raising both hands and waving them in the direction of the Eternal Snows. "Everywhere."

"Among the snows?" asked Nisso quickly.

Pavlavon-Nazar snorted. "Foolish one! Not among the snows, but beyond the mountains, on the other side."

"What is on the other side of the mountains? More mountains?"

"More mountains and more mountains and still more mountains, and then the mountains come to an end and the flat places begin."

"Big flat places? Like the Upper Pasture?"

"If you added to the Upper Pasture another pasture just as big and then a third and then kept adding pasture to pasture all summer long, you would get a flat place less than half as big as that on the other side of the mountains."

For a long time Nisso was silenced by the effort to multiply the Upper Pasture, and in the end she asked in some surprise, "How many sheep graze there?"

"As many as there are stars in the sky," answered Pavlavon-Nazar.

"What a lot the Russians must have to eat!" concluded Nisso thoughtfully. For a while she sat quietly watching Pavlavon-Nazar as he began sewing the soft leather boots which were to be a present for her. Then she asked, "What other kinds of people are there?"

"What other kinds? Yakhbarians."

"Are they the people who have animals called—horses?"

"All people have horses, my dear. Only beggars like us in Duob have no horses. What could horses do among these rocks? How could they even get here along our paths? Yakhbarians. The one who took away your Blue Horn was a Yakhbarian."

Nisso frowned as she angrily straightened the hem lying across her dirty knees and said with some spirit, "They are bad people!"

"There are all kinds of people in the world, my flower!"

"The Yakhbarians are bad!" insisted Nisso angrily. "I do not want to hear about them. Who lives over there?"

Pavlavon-Nazar glanced up at the opposite range toward which Nisso was pointing.

"On the other side of those mountains? The Siatangs live there—people like us. Our people. They have a fort on the river."

"What do they do in the fort?"

"Nothing. The Khan used to live there, but now there is no Khan, so I guess the fort is empty."

"Why is there no Khan now?"

"The country is Soviet now."

"Are we also Soviet?"

"Once we live in Siatang, we must also be Soviet. But we are too far away. We have not yet got a taste of the Soviets."

"What does 'Soviet' mean?"

"There you go—having to know everything! As though you would understand even if I did tell you! . . . Here, give me your foot for a measurement."

Nisso proudly stretched out her foot.

"Get up!"

Nisso got up. Pavlavon-Nazar placed her foot on a piece of leather and lightly traced around it with a sharp knife. Then she sat down again, and selecting a sour apple from those in a wooden bowl, bit into it with sharp little teeth like those of a mouse. The conversation continued. As she listened to Pavlavon-Nazar, Nisso studied the mountains enclosing her visible world with more attention than ever before. Fantastic images of the unseen world rose like misty visions in the clarity of her consciousness. Dozens of naive questions demanded immediate answer, and Pavlavon-Nazar responded patiently.

"Where does my aunt go?" asked Nisso unexpectedly.

"Down there to the settlement of Aziz-khon." Pavlavon-Nazar frowned as he answered.

"Is he a Khan?"

"Yes he is. Beyond the Great River there are still Khans."

"Is he rich?"

"He used to be rich. He lived a merry life, holding great feasts whenever it pleased him. Now times have changed. . . ."

"But he still holds feasts."

"Not often now. How do you know?"

"I have heard," said Nisso evasively, like a grownup. "What does my aunt do down there?"

Pavlavon-Nazar sighed deeply but did not answer. Nisso studied his face as he bent over his work. He did not raise his head, but suddenly he laughed and stuck the boot-top he had pulled over his hand into Nisso's face.

"Look! Even a goat has thicker legs than you!"

"No!" said Nisso sternly. "Tell me about my aunt!"

"I will not," replied the old man testily. "When you grow up you will find out for yourself."

"I know already," said Nisso with sudden malice. "It is not for nothing the men make her presents of food and opium."

"Keep quiet! It is no business of yours!"

"Of course not. She is not my mother. She is not mine . . ." and Nisso stopped eating her apple and hung her head sadly.

They both sat silent for some time. Meanwhile Medgzid, who was keeping a careful eye on them from below, crept with sling-shot in hand toward Pavlavon-Nazar's dog, which lay drowsing in the shade of the stone wall. Suddenly Nisso caught sight of him. She sprang up, slid down the ladder into the yard and ran after him crying, "Get out of here or I'll rip off your ears!"

Medgzid calmly aimed his bow and a round stone whistled past her head. Undaunted, Nisso continued her pursuit until the boy disappeared behind the rocks. Then, remembering that the mulberries drying on the roof required turning, she climbed up. The entire flat roof was strewn with a rug of black and white mulberries, filling the breathless air with their spicy fragrance.

7

When she had seen to the mulberries, Nisso decided to climb down to the river for a swim. Every summer she boldly bathed in the cold water. No one had ever taught Nisso to swim, but this art, mastered by all the mountaineers, came to her naturally one day when the swift current lifted her feet off the stony bottom and carried her down-

stream. She had managed to reach the riverbank without anyone's assistance, and ever since then she had ventured out into midstream of her own accord.

Near the path leading down the mountainside three huge boulders had caused the formation of a deep pool through which the water flowed relatively slowly. Here one could splash and swim to his heart's content with no fear of being carried away by the torrent. This became Nisso's favourite spot for bathing.

She flung the dress off her thin, supple body, loosened her hair, and jumped into the water. Emerging alongside one of the boulders, she climbed up and lay warming herself in the sun like a lizard. Then she hung her head over the edge of the rock to the very surface of the water and stared into its green depths, idly admiring the shifting shadows playing among the stones on the bottom. She dropped her hand into the water and was delighted to see the tight, swift-moving glass of its surface shatter beneath her fingers and form two gurgling white streams.

Who knows how long she would have lain thus had not her keen ears detected unexpected sounds above the murmur of the river. Nisso quickly raised her head. A group of people came filing up the path along which people rarely passed. At their head rode a man on a large donkey.

The coming to Duob of these strangers was so unexpected and remarkable an event that Nisso was overwhelmed. She instantly slipped into the water and made her way to the boulder on which she had left her dress, swimming close to the edge of the rocks in order not to be observed. There she cowered behind the boulder, immersed in water up to her shoulders.

The path dipped almost to the water's edge, but the people approaching did not notice Nisso, even though she lifted her head slightly above the boulder to watch them. Their leader was a heavy-set, bewhiskered old man in a voluminous white robe, the sleeves of which were so long that they wrinkled like an accordion from his shoulders to the tips of the fingers crossed on his belly. In front of his donkey walked a young man whose shaven head was not covered by a tubeteika. He was dressed in a black robe and kept kicking away stones over which the donkey might stumble.

The old man in the white robe sat stern and upright, and his white beard was the longest which Nisso had ever seen. "A white turban, a white donkey—everything white!" thought Nisso. "It must be the Khan himself coming to see us!"

Behind them filed the rest of the people on foot. The first of them was carrying a shining gun, not at all like the one owned by Pavlavon-Nazar. The rest had sacks on their backs, were barefooted, and in all respects resembled the inhabitants of Duob. The procession was brought up by a heavily-laden donkey.

Nisso stood shivering from the icy water in which she was remaining far too long as she curiously watched the strangers pass along the path above her very head.

On catching sight of the village, the white-bearded old man said something to his young guide, who listened respectfully and then ran ahead, evidently to warn the inhabitants of the arrival of an important guest.

As soon as the strangers had passed, Nisso pulled herself up on her hands and would have climbed out of the water had she not caught sight of Tura-Mo and Bonday-Sho coming down the path at a respectful distance behind the procession, apparently not daring to join it. Once more Nisso hid in the water; no good would come of having her aunt catch her here doing nothing. For a whole month Tura-Mo had been away from Duob, a month during which Nisso had felt self-confident and at ease. Now her aunt and Bonday-Sho were walking along saying nothing and looking very tired. Bonday-Sho had nothing over his shoulder but an empty goat skin; the long staff he was carrying gave evidence to the fact that he had been climbing. If he had no sack stuffed with food, he must be in a very bad mood, while her aunt must be in an even worse one. It would have been much better if they had never returned.

When they had passed, Nisso at last climbed out of the water. Her teeth were chattering and her whole body was ruddy with cold. She huddled close against the sun-heated surface of the rocks. When she was warm she dressed herself, thinking the while, "Who could those people be? Where do they come from? What could have made such an important old man come to poor, insignificant little Duob? Where

are they going? To our village, or are they just passing through on their way to the Eternal Snows? But there are no more settlements in the direction of the Eternal Snows—nothing but stones and ice—at least according to Pavlavon-Nazar, and he knows for sure. Evidently they have come only to our village. But why? What will they do here? I had better not go home yet.”

Nisso circled the village on the mountain slopes, grabbing hold of wild rose bushes and thorn bushes which in places forced their way among the crumbling rocks of the high, steep cliffs, jumping from rock to rock, scrambling along the edge of precipices and glancing about sharply, cautiously, like a little wild thing. At last the whole of Duob, all its twenty-four low, flat hovels resembling grave mounds, lay spread far below her. She crouched behind a bush and watched.

There was great excitement in the village. All the women who had not gone to the Upper Pasture in the spring were on the roofs beating tambourines and singing, while the men had gathered in the yard of Barad-bek's house where they stood encircling the visitors. Barad-bek himself was bustling about, waving his arms and giving orders. His house was the only one in the village surrounded by a whole orchard of mulberry trees; the other houses boasted only one or two trees. Nisso saw some men lay a rug in the orchard, and she noticed smoke rising from several campfires. Individuals could be seen hurrying among the houses, some of them carrying wood for the fires, others carrying sacks full of mulberries. Two women were hurrying up the path on the right, obviously having been sent to the Upper Pasture for cheese and sour milk. What a feast there would be today!

At last evening brought darkness. For some time now the tambourines had been silent. Everything was quiet down there in the village. Two large red fires shone through the leaves of the orchard, which meant that the visitors were not yet sleeping. Slowly the smoke climbed the slope on which Nisso was watching, and her keen senses detected the odour of stewed meat. The guest must be important indeed if Barad-bek had gone so far as to slaughter a sheep! Carefully letting herself down, Nisso descended to the village along the very edge of the cliff. Not even a mountain goat could have moved so cautiously over the crumbling stones.

With the cliff behind her, Nisso came out on the path which winds along the stream to the Upper Pasture. Strange as it might seem, excited voices were to be heard on every hand at this late hour.

She could hear a woman crying in the first house, but no one was comforting her. "I don't understand!" said Nisso to herself, and hurried on. People were talking and arguing in the houses which she passed, and that at an hour when the village was ordinarily fast asleep!

Again she heard a woman's groans and the curses of old Zebardor. Nisso was alarmed. What could have happened? In the afternoon they had stood on the roof-tops singing and beating their tambourines, and now they were behaving as though each had been bitten by a snake!

Nisso hurried from fence to fence until she reached her own house, but she made sure that her aunt was not at home before entering. Medgzid and Zaybo were sleeping peacefully. This reassured Nisso, who also lay down to sleep. But for a long time she lay awake, disturbed by the unusual events of the day. She was eager to know who the visitors were, and she was afraid that her aunt would beat her in the morning.

But at last sleep conquered all her fears.

8

In the morning Nisso's aunt entered the house calm and determined. Nisso was sitting running her finger around the rim of an empty iron pot to make it give off a dull ring. The girl drew herself up tensely in anticipation of her aunt's usual rage: she would be sure to come over, shout at her and strike her. Nisso must not answer back—only cover her face with her arm. Medgzid and Zaybo were crouching in the corner watching, with a malicious glint in their eyes.

But Tura-Mo took a few steps and stopped, saying nothing. Nisso waited in amazement, then risked a swift glance at her aunt.

Tura-Mo's braids were combed. Her white tunic had been washed and had not yet dried on her body. Her trousers were tied at the ankle. What was wrong with her? Why was she so calm and clean?

Nisso risked another glance. Her aunt was biting her lips and looking at Nisso intently, with eyes made even larger by the dark circles under them—the effects of opium. Why did she keep standing there and looking at her?

Nisso began to run her nail more energetically around the rim of the pot, producing a harsh squeak.

"Get up," said her aunt calmly.

Nisso got up. "Now she will begin," she thought. But Tura-Mo only took the wooden comb out of her sleeve and began to dress Nisso's hair. Neither said a word. Nisso was at a loss. When she had carefully combed Nisso's hair, Tura-Mo arranged it in two braids, then took off her brass bracelet and put it on Nisso's thin wrist, likewise removing her necklace of black glass beads, which she placed around Nisso's neck.

All this was so remarkable that Nisso was filled with a presentiment of something very important and very unpleasant. But she said nothing and made no protest, quietly awaiting further developments with lowered eyes. Her aunt stepped backwards and swept her with a glance. Apparently satisfied with the results, she said brusquely, "Come on now."

She took Nisso by the hand and led her out of the house. The child involuntarily associated all that was taking place with the arrival of the important guest, and she walked beside her aunt like a captive wolf cub ready to bite at the slightest provocation.

Mats had been spread on the ground cleared for falling mulberries, and there against a pile of blankets sat the august and imposing old man surrounded by the family of Barad-bek. Mulberries, hazelnuts and almonds were spread before him on bits of cloth. Barad-bek himself was pouring tea from a narrow-necked pitcher and offering bowls of the drink to everybody.

Not daring to come nearer, Tura-Mo stopped at a respectful distance, holding Nisso tightly by the hand.

The white-bearded *khalifa*, collector of tithes to the living god of the Ismailian religion, examined Nisso through half-closed eyes. The girl glanced about her in fear and indignation, but she was prevented from running away by the sullen servant of the *khalifa* who was standing with Tura-Mo behind her back.

The khalifa gestured to Nisso to come closer and the sullen servant gave her a push. Half rising, the old man felt Nisso's shoulders and hips with his coarse fingers, while the servant made sure that she could not run away by winding her braid around his hand.

"Stand quiet when the shadow of god is speaking with you!"

"Aziz-khon will take her," concluded the khalifa curtly. "Bring my bag and give the woman what was promised."

The servant brought the bag and Barad-bek began pouring bowlfuls of dry opium into Tura-Mo's skirt. Three bowlfuls. But Tura-Mo had expected more.

"You said five," she said softly.

"Five! Is the new dress worth nothing? All right—one more for the sake of her beauty, and no tithes from you for a whole year to come. What more do you want? Be off with you now!"

Tura-Mo moved away without a glance at Nisso. But when she had reached the middle of the garden she turned around and called out, "Do not cry! Your new life will be better than any you could have dreamed of here!"

Nisso stood before the old man with closed eyes while the tears slowly rolled from beneath her lashes.

* * *

That evening the caravan moved slowly down the path. Four donkeys belonging to Barad-bek were loaded with gifts to the living god of the Ismailians. Two inhabitants of Duob drove the donkeys ahead with sticks and were entrusted to bring them back. Behind the donkeys moved three cows, eight sheep and eleven goats. Nisso followed on foot just as her mother, Rozia-Mo, had tread that very path. The khalifa rode ahead on a large white donkey. He was greatly pleased. Aziz-khon's expectations would not be disappointed, for the simpleton Bonday-Sho had not exaggerated the girl's beauty. The khalifa was certain that he would receive no less than forty coins for the girl. Ten of them he would sacrifice to the living god—the remaining thirty would be for himself.



CHAPTER TWO

1

A NEW LIFE had begun in the settlements on the Soviet side of the river. The border had not yet been closed, and the entire Soviet region of the High Mountains was still in direct communication with the petty khanates located along the Great River and representing the outlying provinces of the neighbouring state.

People of a new type appeared in the Russian fort which stood on the upper reaches of the Great River. These people wore a red star on their caps. These people did not riot or break into the homes of the mountaineers to deprive them of their few possessions. These people entered the nearest settlement and said that according to the new law, the Russians and the local inhabitants were brothers, and that they could live together in friendship if only they did away with the Khans. Into the most distant gorges penetrated rumours that these people were denying the Preordained and proclaiming the strength of the united poor.

The local elders, the kinsmen of the Khan and the members of the priesthood hastened to cross the Great River. "We do not wish to serve as foot-mats for unbelievers," they said to those who remained behind. "And those of you who become friendly with the unbelievers will be punished by an unforgiving god."

But another opinion was held by those who had long since ceased to believe the Khans, the elders, and the members of the priesthood. They gathered under the mulberry trees and carried on heated discussions, affirming that things could not possibly be worse than they were; that probably they would become better, if anything. They returned to their

homes and to their fields with the vague hope that the day would come when people would be happy who had not dreamed of finding happiness even in paradise.

For some years these villages shadowed by the steep walls of the canyon had been Soviet. And slowly but surely their life was undergoing a change, though people went on labouring as before. With the sunrise they clambered up to their tiny fields and cleared them of stones, they let the water through the irrigation ditches dug along the rocky cliffs, they gathered the dry and blackened burrs growing on the slopes, and they did innumerable other difficult and necessary tasks.

Nothing at all changed in the settlements along the left bank of the Great River. The petty mountain khanates continued to observe the laws of the All-Powerful Potentate, whose rule was considered as divinely ordained as the wind which caressed or withered the crops.

One of the small mountain-locked khanates was called Yakhbar, and was ruled over by Aziz-khon. In distant times the Yakhbarians had more than once crossed the Great River to make raids on Siatang, the neighbouring khanate, forcing the inhabitants of Siatang to pay them tribute and reducing their Siatang captives to a state of slavery. Then came a later period when the Russians drove the Yakhbarians out of the region of the High Mountains as far as the Great River. But while Siatang formally became part of the Russian state, no Russians came to live in these mountains; the tsarist government finding nothing of interest in this wild, impoverished region.

Members of the Siatang nobility bought everything they needed on the territory ruled by the All-Powerful Potentate. Merchants from provinces in the interior came to Siatang through Yakhbar. Whenever they arrived they would complain of the cold, claiming that those who had been born in mild and fertile valleys could not stand the life among these gloomy, rocky mountains. After they had sold their silks, clothes, European dyes and mirrors, disposed of their opium and exchanged their rifles for sacks of the gold washed from the mountain streams, for panther and beaver skins, and sometimes for cheap and pretty girls, they would again go away. The Yakhbarian Khan demanded the

high tax of one-twelfth of their profits for the right of transit. This tax brought him as much wealth as the earlier raids on Siatang had brought his ancestors.

But when Siatang became Soviet and all the people of high position escaped to Yakhbar to seek refuge with Aziz-khon, the merchants ceased coming to Siatang. And they began to come less frequently to Yakhbar. The Yakhbarians alone could not supply them with their former profits, while the emigrants from Siatang who had been deprived of their land and other sources of wealth not only stopped buying their goods, but were themselves ready to sell them whatever of value they had accumulated. On leaving, the merchants cursed their fate and swore that soon they would have no business at all within the holdings of Aziz-khon. Aziz-khon himself could no longer extort his transit tax, which meant that he could no longer hold extravagant feasts and elaborate hunts. He could no longer invite wandering magicians, dancers, and musicians to be his guests, nor could he go on visits to the neighbouring khanates. His fear of impending poverty gradually made him gloomy, stingy, calculating and unsociable, so that it soon became impossible to recognize in him the Khan who had once been the most lavish and powerful ruler within the limits of the High Mountains.

From the provinces in the interior came alarming rumours that soon war with the Russians would begin, a war which would roll down upon Yakhbar from those lofty mountains, filling the rivers and valleys with blood. Aziz-khon knew that the All-Powerful Potentate had no wish to fight the Russians, but when European secret agents came to Yakhbar, the Yakhbarian Khan gladly extended his hospitality and attempted to win their favour. In spite of their rich presents, Aziz-khon made no definite promises, figuring that if he should err in choosing the victor, he might lose his head instead of gaining a fortune.

Aziz-khon spent most of his solitude pondering the question of the incarnation of divinities and was careful to do nothing which might invoke the wrath of god during these restless times.

Aziz-khon was a Shiite of the Aga-khon sect, in other words, a Mohammedan who believed that the soul of the

prophet Ali was now incarnate in the forty-eighth imam living in distant Bombay and ruling over the millions of believers spread over the vast territory of India, Afghanistan, Western China, Persia, Badakhshan, Asia Minor and Egypt. According to the teachings of this sect, simple believers could not reach god with their own prayers, but were obliged to pay one-tenth of their entire income to the *pirs* to pray for them. There was no *pir* in Yakhbar. Formerly he had lived in Siatang, but on emigrating had preferred living in one of the provinces of the interior to remaining in Yakhbar. The *khalifa* who collected the taxes became his representative in Yakhbar.

Next to the Khan, the most respected and influential person in Yakhbar was the *khalifa*, and for that reason Aziz-khon cultivated his friendship. During the long mornings they composed verses together (for, like all oriental rulers, Aziz-khon considered himself a poet). They also read *The Face of Our Faith* together—a book written hundreds of years earlier by *pir Sho-Nasir-Hosro* and accessible in meaning only to the enlightened. Together they mused on feminine beauty, for the sake of which the dogmas of Mohammedanism might sometimes be given an arbitrary interpretation.

When Aziz-khon heard that in the village of Duob on the Soviet side lived a beautiful young girl whom he could buy for a song, the *khalifa* convinced the Khan that he was not yet so old that he must satisfy himself with wives who had long since ceased to please him. The *khalifa* even agreed to go to Yakhbar himself and secure the girl.

And when the *khalifa* brought Nisso and she proved to be beautiful indeed, Aziz-khon paid the forty coins without a murmur. This served to further strengthen the friendship between the *khalifa* and Aziz-khon.

The Khan quartered the girl in his house and did not hasten to make her his wife, knowing full well that there was no chance of his prey escaping him.

The pretentious dwelling of Aziz-khon stood on a cliff above the Great River, which flowed calmly but swiftly through a wide valley between two mountain ranges. The residence resembled an ancient fortress with its serrated wall from which could be seen the entire Great River valley. This

valley, framed by lofty cliffs and steep slopes, was broken up into tiny fields and orchards of mulberry and apricot trees. The stairways of the Khan's house were made of tree stumps, and they led through square openings in the ceiling to other rooms arranged in terraces. The doors adjoined each other at right angles. They were so narrow that they could be entered by only one person at a time and so low that Aziz-khon had to bend double in order to pass through. The fear of neighbouring Khans had led the great-grandfather of Aziz-khon to construct quarters so cramped that enemies could neither shoot a bow nor wield a dagger in them. Formerly whenever the Yakhbar Khans had considered themselves to be in danger, they had never spent two nights in the same room, knowing that the opening in the ceiling offered the enemy a convenient vantage point for aiming an arrow.

But this period of danger and sudden attack had long passed, and whether he lay in his own room or up on the roof, the sleep of Aziz-khon was sound and untroubled. Now no one guarded the residence. For many years there had been no regular troops in Yakhbar, and even the ressalidar, head of the Yakhbarian horsemen who had been dispersed to their homes, lived quietly in one of the distant settlements of the khanate. Aziz-khon disliked him, and for years they had not met.

On the top of the cliff where the residence stood grew an orchard, the trees of which rose above the serrated wall and hung their branches over the river. The orchard was always shady. No one could enter it without the permission of Aziz-khon, but none of the local inhabitants working in Aziz-khon's fields in the valley below thought of even glancing in its direction. They all knew that the wives of their lord spent their leisure in that orchard. From this wall his wives, both old and young, could view the entire world, they themselves remaining unseen, according to the will of the prophet. Aziz-khon himself was fond of sitting on his favourite rock surmounting the wall and philosophizing as he contemplated his realm, as well as the country on the other side of the river which now recognized some new, incomprehensible authority other than his own.

Aziz-khon recalled the time when both banks of the river had been ruled by his grandfather, later murdered by his

own son, the father of Aziz-khon. Vast riches had flowed into their coffers in those days. Now everything was dilapidated. The serrated wall was crumbling, the clay figures on the corner towers were being washed away by the rain, the carved sliding window-frames of the porch were broken, and it had become impossible to obtain the hard wood which the grandfather of Aziz-khon had specially ordered from provinces in the interior. And even if it had been obtainable, there were no longer craftsmen who could so skilfully carve it into wooden plaques bearing quotations from the holy writings.

"Everything is in a state of decay," thought Aziz-khon, "and all the blame lies on those accursed foreigners who now rule that half of the world lying on the other side of the Great River." That was the reason why the thoughts of Aziz-khon were always bitter and why his long face with its deep furrows had become dry and yellow and his greying beard had gradually grown as stiff and stubborn as camel's hair.

Aziz-khon was losing power over even his own people. To be sure, no one dared contradict him or refuse to obey him, but even the most beggarly of the Yakhbarians now looked at him with the expression of a captive wolf rather than of a submissive slave. And that was not difficult to understand. On the other side of the river people no longer had respect for religion or ancestry or the authority of the Khans. "Those hare-brained Russians have torn down the whole divine structure of power and reverence," thought Aziz-khon indignantly. "What good can possibly come of removing the yoke from the shoulders of the common people!"

Once Aziz-khon had lost his wealth and power, the only consolations life held for him were the holy books and the pleasures of the harem.

2

Aziz-khon was watching Nisso skilfully moulding balls of straw and manure out in the yard.

To be sure, one of the servants could have been assigned the task of getting ready fuel for the winter. But that was woman's work and women should not be allowed to remain idle. Besides which, Nisso should in some way make good

the forty coins which had been paid for her. She did not know how to cook, and if he allowed her to join his older wives there would immediately be another fight. If he should send her to work in the valley, she might make eyes at some worthless vagabond. It was better that she work here. She had strong hands which easily moulded the balls into cakes and pasted them so firmly to the sun-hot stone that they stuck there even when dry.

But the girl had a nasty disposition. She was always standing with her back to you, and she became vicious and clawing when crossed, like a little panther, only instead of hissing, she scratched and bit without a sound. Very well, little asp, you shall work without respite. Sooner or later you are sure to submit; you are not the first to be tamed!

Aziz-khon ignored all his wives these days. He beat them and railed at them and drove them away, and everyone knew why. If they had dared, they would have torn Nisso to pieces. But they all feared the rage of Aziz-khon, and for that reason limited their protest to giving Nisso's braids a vicious yank when no one was looking, then leaving her strictly alone. They could not understand why Nisso had not once complained of them to Aziz-khon.

Meanwhile Nisso was sitting among the balls she had moulded, kneading fresh manure which had been warmed in the sun. Her face wore an expression of concentrated thought, and the ball she had just mixed with straw lay forgotten in the hands relaxed on her knees.

"Get to work, Nisso. No lazying, if you please!"

The voice of Aziz-khon was calm but stern. Nisso started up.

"Work, work! Nothing but work for him!" thought Nisso angrily, but once more she began to toss the ball, catching it in both hands and patting it into a cake which she placed to one side. When Aziz-khon seemed to be paying no attention to her, she once more returned to her thoughts. What did she care about that work? The fewer the balls she made, the colder it would be for Aziz-khon in the winter. Here everything was strange and unpleasant for Nisso. But in her fear of being reprimanded again, she picked up another handful of manure and began kneading it.

There among the cakes drying in front of her, Nisso suddenly caught sight of a little yellow-headed lizard. She became utterly motionless in her eagerness not to frighten it away. The lizard crawled out into the sun, stretched its front legs and cautiously turned its head from side to side. In a second it would slip off the stone and disappear. A hunter's enthusiasm shone in Nisso's eyes. She seized the lizard and held it panting in her palm. Then she slightly relaxed her fingers, and the little head of the lizard turned from side to side in mortal fear. Oblivious of the presence of Aziz-khon, who kept watching her patiently from behind, Nisso glanced at the wicked little eyes shining in the sun, then quickly pressed a deep hole into one of the soft balls and put her nimble captive into it. She covered the opening with her palm until she had made a lattice of straws serving as bars to this tiny prison constructed in a trice. Now this ball was distinguished from all the others by the fact that it was inhabited by a living creature, which Nisso watched attentively through the straw bars.

Aziz-khon was inclined to smile. His heart softened, but he would not show it.

"Nisso, come here," he said calmly.

"I wonder if he has noticed," thought Nisso.

Cold and aloof, with all her joy suddenly gone, Nisso dropped her ball and stood up. But then she quickly stooped down, smeared a piece of clay over the straw bars and placed the ball apart from the others. With downcast eyes she reluctantly went towards Aziz-khon.

"Climb up here, do you hear me? It is the Khan who is calling you."

Nisso stopped in front of the old man, but her eyes wandered toward the river and the opposite bank.

"Are you tired of working?" asked Aziz-khon, narrowing his eyes. "Here, sit down alongside of me."

Nisso obediently sat down on the rock. Aziz-khon thrust his hand into the pocket of his unbuttoned Yakhbarian coat and drew out a string of beads which he arranged in the palm of his hand. They consisted of bright red stones resembling berries, triangles of green glass and squares of black agate bearing holy inscriptions.

"Take them. They are for you."

Nisso glanced at the beads and turned away.

"Take them, do you hear?" repeated the old man in a tone of irritation. "Lower your head." And he himself put the beads around her neck.

With an instinctive movement, Nisso would have torn off the necklace, but on noticing the wrathful glint in the old man's eyes she ran back to where she had been working, knelt once more among the balls, and began to knead them quickly and energetically. Aziz-khon watched the bent back of this unyielding girl with marked annoyance, but her back was so supple and graceful that Aziz-khon could not help admiring it.

It seemed to poor Nisso that the necklace was burning into her flesh.

3

The law permitted Aziz-khon to keep four wives. But what were the four wives, when he was in a position to keep concubines besides? And what were the concubines when even they could be pestered to death by a nasty boy who was allowed to do whatever he pleased?

Everywhere could be heard the gossip being whispered from ear to ear—behind the stone walls of Aziz-khon's residence, in dark corners, in the garden where the sweet, sun-dried mulberries dropped from the trees, at the edge of the warm pond formed by a mountain stream, at the great hearths where various delectable dishes were prepared (Aziz-khon loved the food so skilfully cooked by his oldest wife), in the large folds for the sheep and cows. The whispering was tainted with jealousy and spite and fear and greed and cunning, for everyone sought the favour of the master of the house.

The women hated Zogar, but this black-haired boy with the innocent face and vixenish eyes was the only one who did not fear being punished. He was only thirteen years old, but had he been the very son of Aziz-khon, he could not have been more bold and self-confident. No one dared say a word to him. He did nothing all day long. For hours at a time he would lie on the flat, sunny roof scratching his chest and stomach as he watched the bustling women and thought up sarcastic, insulting words to hurl at them. He would climb

down off the roof to get a drink of the milk they had just brought, snatching the wooden bowls out of their hands and throwing them about the yard. He did not hesitate to strike anyone who displeased him, and he knew that no one dared complain of him. In addition to all this, he could leave the house without permission and go down into the valley, running through the fields and orchards, forcing his insolence on the villagers who feared the lies and tales he would tell the master. The women knew that if they made Zogar a present of a copper bracelet or a ring set with a blue stone or a bit of Russian sugar he would go to the village for them and convey some request to their relatives, and that on returning he would tell them whether this one's mother was well, whether that one's sister had been bought by the stranger from the neighbouring khanate, whether the cousin of still another had been cured of the sores on his back. For a whole month thereafter they willingly endured his pestering, his threats to report to Aziz-khon how the master's orders were being carried out, his wheedling of a bowl of syrup from one wife and a ball of red wool from another. The wives of Aziz-khon were willing to endure anything for the sake of finding out how their relatives were and of hearing the latest news, which they then secretly discussed among themselves.

But there was one thing which Zogar did not dare to do: he did not dare to touch Nisso. One day he had placed a bit of broken razor in her soft boot, and she had cut her foot. For this Aziz-khon had given Zogar a merciless beating.

Zogar hated the girl. He pretended not to notice her, but actually he followed her every movement. Oh for the day to come when she would fall into disfavour with the master!

But Nisso had no relatives in the village, and in no way did she require the aid of Zogar. She did not speak to the other wives, so there was no opportunity for Zogar to eavesdrop. All day long she was in the house and garden. No one could guess how she behaved at night, when Aziz-khon took her with him to his quarters. Even if she did not submit to the master's will at such times, no one but he could know.

On the other hand, Zogar guessed a thing or two after having seen the mother of Aziz-khon bring two fat frogs from the valley. Through a crack in the roof he watched the old woman tie the frogs back to back, draw two black hearts in

soot on their yellow bellies, fry them alive and then beat them into powder on a flat stone. Everyone in those parts knew the purpose of such powder.

Zogar maliciously gossiped to the women about what he had seen, and everyone in the house became aware of the fact that Nisso was resisting Aziz-khon. Why else would he need this powder serving as a charm to weld two hearts?

Nisso herself feared that the charm would have power over her. When in the middle of the night Aziz-khon sprinkled this powder in her hair, she bit the old man's hands and hid in a corner of the garden piled high with sharp, lacerating rocks. Fearing that he might find her, she remained there until noon of the following day. But Aziz-khon did not search for her. He sat in his room all day long. That evening the khalifa came to visit him, and the rays of the oil lamp shone through the cracks in the stone wall until late at night.

Nisso could not understand what had saved her from the magic force of the powder, but she decided to be even more stubborn and vicious.

In the home of Aziz-khon, as everywhere else in the High Mountains, superstitions, charms and incantations were considered indispensable. Everyone believed that a huge Dragon named Ashtar-i-Kalon, dwelled in the Great River and wielded its power over the lives of men. For that reason no one dared go to the river at night without first muttering an incantation. And no one doubted that the drownings which occurred every year were due to the fact that the victims had either neglected to pronounce the incantation or had pronounced it incorrectly.

It was likewise general knowledge that any woman who wished to have fine children must surely go to the rocky gorge called Rakh-Davan not far from the bank of the Great River and there hang a bit of her clothing on one of the bushes growing on the slope. That explained why this gorge was gay with strips of muslin and gingham and cloth waving in the breeze. And that was why Aziz-khon permitted his wives, chaperoned by his decrepit old mother, to make an annual excursion to the Rakh-Davan Gorge.

One day a high wind snatched a white kerchief which had been the gift of Aziz-khon from off of Nisso's head, lifting it into the air and dropping it into the waters of the Great

River. The old mother of Aziz-khon said to Nisso: "He who leaves the beaten path is sure to fall upon a sharp razor. Obey the wishes of Aziz-khon. Consider my words for three days, my child, and if the kerchief is returned to your head, then you will know that god wishes you to submit. If after that you persist in being as stubborn as an ass, then a vulture will come at night and peck out your eyes."

For three days and three nights Nisso was tortured by doubt. When she awoke on the morning of the fourth day and found the white kerchief once more on her head, she was so frightened that she almost fainted. The old woman sprinkled water on her face and said angrily, "Now you can see for yourself the will of the Protector."

Nisso spent the following day on the verge of submission, thinking that indeed she was obliged to bow to the will of god. But the loathing she felt for the old man triumphed. She ran away from him again that night, crying as she ran, "Better to let the vultures peck out my eyes!"

She spent the whole day crying among the rocks in the corner of the garden and watching the sky through her tears, expecting every minute to see the huge dark wings of the avenging bird.

But the sky remained as blue as usual, unclouded by any shadow but that of the little hawks circling above the valley.

Toward evening Nisso became more calm and began to think that perhaps she was possessed of her own personal dev, a good spirit guarding her from the ill will of the Protector. Or perhaps the old woman had simply deceived her. Nisso's determination became more and more firm. But it was true that vultures often flew above the valley of the Great River, and sometimes they even circled above the rock on which stood the residence of Aziz-khon. Formerly Nisso had only admired their even flight and the thrust of their great brown wings. But ever since the incident with the kerchief she was gripped by terror every time she caught sight of a vulture. She would run into the house and sit trembling until someone came to scold her and drive her out into the yard.

If it had not been for this fear and the importunities of Aziz-khon, Nisso might have been pleased with her life here, which was incomparably better than in Duob. She no longer

had to worry about securing food. Everyone was well fed in the home of Aziz-khon, and no one grudged Nisso food. She ate rhubarb and rice, fresh mutton and goat's cheese, boiled meat and salt, and flat cakes baked with liver; and she drank milk and tea—all things which she had not even heard of in that other life.

And Aziz-khon was generous in dressing Nisso. Like all the other women, she wore a long tunic with a narrow collar. The tunic was embroidered around the bottom with woolen thread and had wide sleeves tight at the wrist. Under this tunic she wore wide kashmir trousers tied at the ankles with rug braid ornamented with bits of red and green glass. She no longer wore her hair in two braids with a part down the middle, but in twenty tiny braids, as was the style among Yakhbarian women. She had a gold-embroidered tubeteika, but the old mother of Aziz-khon was too stingy to let her wear it. The other wives of Aziz-khon rouged their cheeks and dyed their eyebrows and lashes with antimony. But Nisso did not want to please Aziz-khon and resisted every effort of the old woman to make her paint her face. The women of the High Mountains had never covered their faces with a veil, a fact which distinguished them from other women of the Orient. Only when they appeared among strangers were they expected to cover the lower part of their faces with a white kerchief. But the wives of Aziz-khon never met strangers, except on their annual visit to the Rakh-Davan Gorge in the company of the old woman, and on the one or two other occasions in the course of the year when Aziz-khon allowed them to be present at some celebration.

Nisso's face remained uncovered. Had anyone in that land known anything about the Greeks of antiquity, he could have correctly identified Nisso's faultless beauty. But beautiful, fine-featured faces were no rarity among the women of the High Mountains, and all of them were distinguished for the grace of their figures. Nisso was no lovelier than many others, but Aziz-khon was quite right in finding a distinctive attraction in the thoughtful expressiveness of her large eyes whose glance was always severe and extremely serious. Had it not been for those eyes, it is doubtful that Aziz-khon would have waited so long for Nisso to submit of her own free will. And he became even more patient when Nisso's eyes flashed

with anger and a hate beyond her years. Aziz-khon was only too accustomed to feminine submission born of fear of his wrath. At first Nisso had also feared him, but gradually he became convinced that Nisso's fear was passing. He was disconcerted by the realization that the girl was beginning to recognize her power over him. Yet he was patient and sure that he could find the strength to wait a little longer.

Of course Nisso could not guess the thoughts of Aziz-khon, but no more could anyone guess hers. Seeing how quiet she had become, everyone assumed that she had submitted and thus found peace. They were aware of her caprices, but one could not attribute significance to all the caprices of a woman.

For example, the other wives of Aziz-khon always bathed in a little, muddy pool in the centre of the garden. Nisso refused to enter this pool, declaring that she was afraid of water snakes, and no amount of bantering or assurances that there were no snakes in the pond could make her change her mind. The old woman declared that Aziz-khon would not admit such a dirty little pig into his quarters, but Nisso took not the slightest offence and always ran away when the old woman tried to force her into the pool. Who could have guessed that Nisso made a particular effort to be dirty in order to offend Aziz-khon and make herself repulsive to him!

4

One day Zogar ran up to Aziz-khon crying, "Just see what your Nisso is doing! Instead of thanking you for feeding her, she steals from you!"

Aziz-khon, who was moving a hairy yellow finger along one of the yellow pages of *The Face of Our Faith*, put aside the book, pulled himself up with a grunt, and went with Zogar to the corner of the garden where Nisso loved to hide among the rocks. The girl was not there, but with an expression of great secretiveness Zogar beckoned the old man to a crack between two rocks. The boy himself ran ahead, clearing away the dry leaves with his hands.

"Look! What do you call that?"

Aziz-khon peered into the fissure and pulled out a small bundle. Zogar eagerly helped him unwrap it. The bundle

proved to contain apricot pits, grains of wheat, dried bits of barley cake, dried apples, and a lump of mulberry flour which had been moistened and dried. Tied in a separate rag were the feathers of a titmouse and the teeth of a lizard. In addition to these, Nisso's stores contained some glass beads, a piece of broken mirror, and a triangular amulet on a string which had undoubtedly been taken off the neck of one of Aziz-khon's calves. Zogar spitefully poked his finger at each new discovery, looking insinuatingly into the face of Aziz-khon and saying, "See this? And this? And here's another."

Aziz-khon frowned as he stood above the unwrapped bundle considering what he should do. At last he turned to Zogar and said abruptly, "Go bring her here." Zogar ran toward the house filled with the joyous anticipation of seeing the hated Nisso punished.

Aziz-khon took a seat on a rock. "Could she have been planning to run away?" he thought uneasily, but immediately dismissed the thought as impossible. He could not recall a single time when a Yakhbarian woman had resolved on a step so daring as to run away from her husband. True enough, there had been occasions when women had left particularly cruel husbands to return to the home of their parents. But in every case this had been done with the knowledge and consent of the woman's father, who had compensated the husband by returning the price paid for his wife. Few such foolish fathers were to be found in Yakhbar; in the course of his long life Aziz-khon had heard of only two or three. But Nisso had neither father nor mother. To whom could she return? Furthermore, the girl could not hope to cross the Great River without help, and no one in the settlements belonging to Aziz-khon would dare to help her. No, it was clear that some other explanation must be found for the hidden stores.

"Here she comes!" cried Zogar, who suddenly appeared with a whip in his hand.

"Why have you brought that?" asked Aziz-khon, nodding at the whip.

Zogar gave a honied smile. "I think you must beat her."

Aziz-khon slowly raised his eyes and gazed searchingly at Zogar, then in sudden fury he grabbed the whip out of the boy's hands.

"Desecrations on the grave of your infamous father!" he shouted, lashing out at Zogar's shoulders with the whip. "Get out of here!"

With a howl of pain Zogar clutched his shoulder, jumped up and made for the house. As he caught sight of Nisso approaching, he glanced back at the old man to make sure he was not looking, then ran over and struck Nisso such a blow on the chest that she cried out in pain. Aziz-khon turned around, but Zogar disappeared among the trees muttering viciously, "I shall scratch out your eyes yet!"

Nisso was rubbing the spot where she had been struck as she came boldly up to Aziz-khon.

"Did you hide these things?" asked the old man sullenly.

"Yes I did!" There was a challenge in Nisso's reply.

"For what purpose?"

"For my own purpose."

"Obviously not for mine. Answer me, I tell you! For what purpose? If you do not wish to answer—here—have a taste of this!" and Aziz-khon shook the whip.

"Beat me!" said Nisso in a voice trembling with hate. "Go ahead and beat me!" and she threw back her head so that he might strike her across the face.

Aziz-khon did not immediately reply. When he did, it was with unexpected gentleness, "Sit down. Here, alongside of me. You can tell me everything. I shall not be angry."

When Nisso continued standing where she was, Aziz-khon took her by the hand and drew her to him. Now she was standing so close that she touched his knee, looking off to one side with an expression of inexpressible weariness. Aziz-khon attempted to move her with kindness.

"Listen, my dear—I do not wish to quote the law which says, 'There is no such thing as a woman. There is only a staff for her back.' Do you find that I am a very evil person?"

Nisso made no reply.

"Why are you silent? Why are you afraid of me?"

"I am not afraid," said Nisso curtly. "Let me go."

"Just a minute, Nisso. First you must speak to me. Is your life here so very hard? Do you not have enough to eat? Do you not have pretty clothes to wear? Do I not treat you with consideration? Do you think you would have such a life in Duob? Your heart is black, Nisso, and your eyes are

as wicked as those of a wild cat. You are always dreaming of some other place. Tell me why."

"You summon me to your quarters," said Nisso slowly. "I wish to sleep in the garden."

"Ah, Nisso, do you think I treat you as I treat the others? A wise man has said, 'If you stand for a year at someone's door, at last you will be invited to enter and take that which you seek.' I am your lord and master. I am a great person. Who dares to say that Aziz-khon is not a great person? I do not beat you; I do not command you; I stand patiently at your door and wait. Do I interfere with your doing what you please? Do I ask you why you have secrets? This, for example," and Aziz-khon pointed to the open bundle. "What does it mean?"

"The amulets are mine," said Nisso brusquely.

"All right. The amulets are yours," drawled Aziz-khon patiently. "But the food? The grain, the cakes and the flour?"

Nisso turned to Aziz-khon sharply. "I have no secrets. The food is for my friend!"

"For your—friend? You have—a friend?"

"A *keklik*." It comes when I whistle," answered Nisso, oblivious of the expression in the old man's eyes. "It perches on my wrist and eats from my hand. Is there anything wrong in that? Do you want to take it away from me? You say you are a good man, but that Zogar of yours follows on my trail like a bloodhound!"

Aziz-khon sighed with relief. Nisso went on, looking him straight in the eye. "What do I want with your clothes and your food and your talk? Your wives are like evil devils; your Zogar is a stinking polecat; your house is a hole in the ground. You do not allow me to go to the pasture; you do not allow me to go to the river. You expect me to bathe in that dirty pool like a frog. There is no one here who would not be glad to throw a stone at my head. You are a bad man, and I do not want to live with you, I do not want to listen to you, I do not want to have anything to do with you. It would be better if you beat me. I want to die! Let me go!"

Nisso tore away from the old man and ran to one side,

* *Keklik*—A mountain partridge.

where she dropped down beside a large flat rock and hid her face in her hands.

Aziz-khon stroked his beard and watched her thoughtfully. He was about to submit to his desire to rise and go silently over to Nisso, when from behind the rocks appeared a tiny grey keklik. It turned its head from side to side and ran quickly over to the pile of rocks where it stopped, puffed itself up, flapped its blue-tinted wings and glanced around. Then it scuttled quickly over the stones with its head strained forward, crying "teke-ke, teke-ke, teke-ke." With a flutter of wings it flew up to Nisso's shoulder. The girl looked sharply around and seized the bird. Pressing it to her breast, she ran with it into the heart of the garden.

Aziz-khon made no movement, and a slow smile stole across his face. Stooping down to the bundle, he tied it up and thrust it back into the crack between the rocks, covering it with leaves. He sighed and shook his head and walked slowly back to the house, turning the handle of the whip in his fingers. His heart was touched by thoughts of Nisso, and he was utterly at a loss as to how he should behave towards her.

In the yard of the house Aziz-khon saw Zogar lolling on a mat and spitting out apricot pits. The old man rushed at him in a rage, threatening him with the whip and muttering, "I shall send you off to dig a canal in the gorge. Never dare let me catch you hounding the steps of the girl again! Lying around idle all day long! Get out of here!"

On hearing the whistle of the whip above his head, the petrified Zogar darted to one side like a frightened puppy.

5

The days and the weeks passed slowly. Except for the fact that Nisso's keklik won general recognition, nothing changed in the house of Aziz-khon. Now the bird followed at her heels wherever she went, never leaving her day or night. It seemed that everyone had left Nisso in peace. Aziz-khon was invariably kind to her. Everything was aimed at having the girl gradually calm down and grow accustomed to the house of Aziz-khon. But Nisso remained as inscrutable as ever, revealing her thoughts to no one. Gradually Zogar

sought to ingratiate himself into her favour. Several times he even offered her sweets which he had stolen from the old woman, but Nisso contemptuously declined them.

However, Zogar was not to be daunted. One morning the keklik disappeared. Nisso ran frantically from corner to corner of the house and garden in search of the bird, and would have suspected Zogar of having made away with it had she not climbed up on the wall and seen the boy coming up the path leading to the valley with the keklik in his arms. Nisso ran across the yard to the ancient stone gates to meet Zogar, who held out the keklik and said:

"Here! I saw it running away down there and I caught it for you. You think I am mean, but what would you have done now without me?"

Nisso hugged the bird to her breast and for the first time said to Zogar with genuine warmth, "Thank you, Zogar."

Within a few days the keklik once more disappeared.

"It has begun to wander off in search of another bird," said Zogar.

Evening descended; already the sun had cast its rosy light on the snow-capped peaks in the distance.

"I know where it is—down there in that field," said Zogar, pointing down from the wall onto which they had both climbed. "See, there's the house of Zenat-Sho with the five poplars around it, then the first ditch, then the second ditch with the field on the other side. Zenat-Sho also has kekliks. I guess yours has gone to join them. That is where I found it last time."

"Could you go get it?"

"Not today, Nisso. The old woman is going to give me a hair cut."

"Oh dear, what shall I do?" cried Nisso unhappily. "During the night it may fly off to the mountains!"

"Of course it may. In fact, it is sure to. Then your keklik will be gone for good. . . . Listen, Nisso, I shall help you. Then you will know that I am really your friend. . . . Aziz-khon has gone to visit the khalifa, did you know that?"

"Yes."

"He will return late along that path. You put on my robe and tubeteika and as soon as it gets dark go down there under cover of the wall. It will not take you long. Surely Aziz-khon

will not return by that time, and if he returns I shall play my flute for him. He likes that. He will not see you come back. See what a good friend I am? And you do not care even to look at me!"

"I am afraid, Zogar. What if he finds out?"

"Humph! You think the fish will come and eat the cat? Who can be afraid of such a thing? He will never know of your going, I tell you!"

Nisso hesitated. But Zogar was so convincing, the danger of losing the keklik was so great, and the temptation of venturing just once down there into the wide free world was so irresistible, that Nisso resolved to take the chance.

Darkness had scarcely fallen when Nisso climbed down the cliff. She was wearing Zogar's dark robe and tubeteika, and her heart was beating with the sweet and apprehensive thrill of doing something forbidden. Her experienced hands and feet clung to crevices in the rock, her sharp eyes sought a way in the darkness, her heart pounded, and her hair fluttered in the wind rising from the surface of the Great River. Here were the berry bushes which she had so often seen from up above. Here was the tiny stream which flowed over the rocks through an artificial bed, and here were the first poplars. Holding on to the branch of a tree, Nisso jumped down onto the earth—the stony earth of the valley. No one noticed her.

She cautiously made her way between fences and ditches, crushing the full stalks of barley under her feet, until she reached the field belonging to the poor peasant Zenat-Sho. In a minute she would find her keklik here among the sown furrows, and then she would run back to the house. Of course she had been wrong to hold such a bad opinion of Zogar.

Someone rustled in the grass nearby, and Nisso quickly crouched down.

"Who goes here? Thieves again!" said an angry masculine voice at Nisso's very ear.

Nisso dashed aside but was caught by someone's strong hand.

"Let me go!" said Nisso in a suppressed whisper. "I am not a thief. I am looking for my keklik."

"Keklik? What keklik? Oh, it is a woman! Where have you come from? What are you doing here?"

"Let me go! Do not shout!" implored the frightened Nisso. "I—I—only be quiet—do not shout!"

The young Yakhbarian looked into Nisso's face without letting her go.

"Do not be afraid if you are not a thief! Somebody comes regularly to steal my millet. This is the first time I have ever seen a girl in a man's robe! Where have you come from? Why are you trembling? Sit down and speak if you have a tongue in your head. Do sit down, or perhaps I look like a wolf, to frighten you so? I am the one who was frightened by you!"

Reassured by the man's affable tone, Nisso overcame her fear. They sat down on the ground next to each other, buried to the shoulder in the high grain. In a few words Nisso explained who she was and how she had come to live in the house of Aziz-khon. Kerim, the eldest son of Zenat-Sho, listened sympathetically and advised her to hurry home "if she did not want to be torn apart by that wolf, Aziz-khon." Kerim undertook to look for the keklik himself, "though I doubt that it has come down here. If I find it, my younger brother will bring it to Aziz-khon tomorrow. There is no place where a tame keklik could hide here in the village."

And though Kerim's words urged Nisso to hurry, even in the darkness his eyes showed that he was in no way anxious to part with her. On the other hand, he knew only too well the danger which threatened the girl if she remained away for long.

"Go," he said. "I do not wish you harm. Go quickly if you are in your right mind."

Dropping Nisso's hand, he got up and went away without another word.

Nisso returned by the same path, filled with alarm as to what would happen to her if Aziz-khon had noticed her absence. She reached the cliff and climbed with beating heart, slipping her fingers into crevices and holding on to protuberances in the rocks.

No sooner had Nisso climbed the ancient wall and clutched the branches of the mulberry tree, than she noticed an unusual stir about the house. Through the foliage of the gar-

den shone two large torches burning on the open porch. Someone with a third torch was being driven by the shrill cries of the old woman to search the garden. Nisso immediately realized that they must be searching for her, and her heart sank. She jumped down from the wall into the dark garden and stole toward the house. Perhaps they were not searching for her after all. Perhaps guests had arrived or someone had died. As she crept from tree to tree in the direction of the house she became convinced that there were no guests. Suddenly she saw Aziz-khon. He was sitting on the edge of the porch with his robe wide open, his feet wide spread, his head bowed, his fingers twisting and untwisting the end of his black beard. Nisso shrank in panic behind the last tree, not knowing what she should do. Suddenly the old woman threw herself upon Nisso with the cry:

"Here she is!"

Instinctively Nisso dodged away, but stopped dead in her tracks when she heard Aziz-khon say:

"Come here!"

Weak with fear, Nisso made her way slowly and uncertainly to the porch. It was as though Aziz-khon were drawing her there with his glance. He said nothing, and as Nisso drew near she was conscious of nothing but that grim glance. Shadows from the torch flitted across his face, across his shiny cheekbones, across the lips he was biting in anger. He made a careless gesture with his hand, and everyone disappeared from the yard, including the old woman. Out of the house came Zogar. With noiseless, catlike tread, he stole unseen behind Aziz-khon and stood there squinting in the uncertain light.

Nisso cowered like a mouse in a trap. Aziz-khon looked at her feet and said nothing, but the pouches under his eyes twitched nervously. Suddenly he jumped up, grabbed Nisso's braids and pulled them viciously, so that Nisso fell on her knees before him, groaning with pain. Covering her face with her hands, she sank prone upon the ground.

"Look at me," said Aziz-khon with suppressed anger, and Nisso let her hands slip from her eyes to her mouth.

"Where were you? Answer me!"

Nisso was terrified by Aziz-khon's narrowed eyes.

"In search of my friend."

"What friend?"

"The keklik. It ran away."

Zogar sniggered. Thrusting his hand inside his robe, he pulled out the ill-fated keklik and showed it to Aziz-khon.

"She is lying! Here is her keklik! It was here all the time!"

Aziz-khon turned to Zogar and, grabbing the bird by the feet, struck Zogar in the face with it as he shouted:

"Get out!"

Zogar flew off to one side.

"If you lie once more, I shall kill you!" hissed Aziz-khon to Nisso, shaking the bird in her face. Then with all his strength he hurled it against a stone, where it remained lying with its feet sticking up and its bloody head drooping. With a cry Nisso fell once more upon the ground.

"Where were you?"

"Down below—in the village," whispered the trembling girl.

"For what purpose?"

There was nothing Nisso could say: the dead keklik lay at her feet.

"Look at me! Do not take your eyes off of me!" said Aziz-khon, lowering his voice in proportion to the growth of his rage. "Did you meet any men in the village? Do not dare to conceal the truth!"

"Yes," ventured Nisso.

"Aha! So you did! May your soul escape through your ears! Your friend, you say! A keklik with a rotten human gizzard! And I pitied you, you snake! Thought you were as pure as a flower! And all the while you were as false as a viper!"

Aziz-khon once more grabbed Nisso by the hair and began to slowly twist her braids around his finger. Nisso moaned softly.

"Answer me!" cried the old man in a shaking voice. "And see that you speak the truth! What did you do there?"

"Nothing," gasped Nisso under her breath. "I swear that I did nothing. He only asked me about the keklik."

"Only asked about the keklik!" scoffed Aziz-khon. "What else?"

"The Protector knows there was nothing else! He said only, 'Go home quickly. Aziz-khon will be angry.'"

"What is his name?"

"Kerim, son of Zenat-Sho. Kerim." Nisso was suddenly shaken with gasping, futile sobs.

Aziz-khon made an effort to calm his fury. Without taking his eyes off Nisso he rose brusquely, seized her neck in a vise-like grasp, and lifted her off the ground.

"Walk up ahead."

She went submissively, choking with pain, shame and insult. He took her to his quarters. From behind a corner of the porch the old woman smacked her toothless gums as she watched them. When they had disappeared she took one of the torches from the socket in the wall and extinguished the flame by scraping it across the ground. She reached for the second one. Immediately the house and garden were engulfed in a darkness filled with the delicate shine of bright and distant stars. A cool breeze rose from the river, stirring the leaves of the garden. For some time the old woman stood there in the darkness like a black ghost, listening to the suppressed moans of Nisso and the dull thud of the blows. At last she gave a sigh of satisfaction and shuffled barefoot across the yard to the women's quarters.

7

Morning dawned as fresh and quiet as usual. From the valley came the first jingle of the tambourines with which the women frightened the birds off the ripening grain. Sheep began to bleat. The murmur of the Great River was so steady and usual that no one noticed it.

The snow-capped peaks assumed a ruddy glow, while the lower ranges became cones of violet shadow which later solidified into grey, then brown. Lower down could be seen patches of sown fields. The green of these fields formed striking colour wherever the slope was not too steep to work.

The usual stir began in the village. Throwing off their quilts, the inhabitants stretched themselves to their full height on the flat roofs before climbing down into the yards, while from every hearth rose a thin stream of blue smoke into the transparent vault above the canyon.

Several horsemen in turbans and white robes and armed with scimitars issued through the end gate of the village. The master of the house where they had spent the night saw them off with low bows as they cantered off down the valley. Probably these horsemen were lords of some distant Yakhbarian settlement, and undoubtedly they had formerly belonged to the troops headed by the now retired ressalidar.

Scarcely had the rays of the sun touched the valley, transforming the night dew into thin mist, than the ragged, half-naked inhabitants began making their way along the paths of the village. They carried primitive implements and heavy sacks, while to their backs were fastened high frames loaded with bundles of clover.

Aziz-khon came out on the porch and demanded tea. For a long time he sat there drinking bowl after bowl, chewing bits of fresh bread and swallowing the raisins which his dry fingers tossed into his mouth one by one.

Nisso continued lying lifeless on the pile of blankets with her sunken eyes fastened on the ceiling. The old man had beaten her heartlessly during the night. But the pain of her insult was as though enveloped in haze. There was much that Nisso did not yet understand, but one thing was clear: now there could be no escape. As soon as night came, Aziz-khon would return to her! It was as though the world had collapsed. Nothing existed any more, neither the sun nor the air nor her very life.

In the home of Aziz-khon the day proceeded as usual, except that everyone was abnormally quiet, fearing to attract the attention of the Khan. The latter remained silent and thoughtful and aloof. He went to a corner of the garden and for a long time walked aimlessly back and forth with an expression of deep concentration and incertitude on his cruel face. Several times his lips moved in something approaching a smile, but immediately his brow became clouded by anger.

On that day the wives of Aziz-khon did not quarrel and fight. They spoke with each other so quietly that even Zogar could overhear nothing from the corner into which he had stolen.

Not once during the day did Aziz-khon go to where Nisso was lying, and in the evening he ordered the old woman to place his blanket on the roof of the house.

But when all had repaired to their chambers for the night, Aziz-khon came out on the porch, clapped his hands, and in a low voice gave an order to the servant who appeared—a dirty, ragged old man, who was one of the impoverished relatives living on the left-overs from the Khan's table and sleeping in a little stone shelter tacked on to the cowshed.

The old man hobbled over to the gates and disappeared down the narrow path leading to the village. Soon the young Yakhbarian named Kerim entered the yard of the Khan's house. Simply and calmly he crossed the yard in his grey homespun robe, faded tubeteika and rawhide boots drawn over bright-coloured stockings. Stopping in front of Aziz-khon, he crossed his hands on his breast in prayerful gesture and bowed to the waist, saying:

"Praised be the Protector who sends you health, oh Aziz-khon! For what purpose have you summoned me?" And without waiting for even a slight nod of the head, he assumed a motionless pose of respect and submission.

"Did I not give you six measures of grain for sowing?" asked Aziz-khon dryly.

"Thanks to your boundless generosity, you did indeed."

"And last year did I not exempt you from paying two measures of the mulberry crop?"

"That you also did, most honourable one."

"And does your house not stand on my land, and did you not take the stones for your house from these hillsides with my permission? Is not this the truth?"

"It is the truth, my lord. Unchanging is your grace."

Kerim's honest eyes were filled with alarm.

"Nor have you yet brought to me the offspring of eight of your sheep."

"If I dare remind you of such a thing, let me state that your servants took all that was due, in addition to three of my lambs for the Celebration of Spring, gracious Khan."

"That does not enter the reckoning," said Aziz-khon with a frown. "That was not for me, but for all the people."

"Yes, yes," agreed the Yakhbarian quickly. "For all the people indeed."

"So listen to me, Kerim. Last night I had a dream. The Protector said that only he might join the blessed who purified himself of all his debts while yet in this life. And he bade

me concern myself with your welfare by seeing that you freed yourself of all accumulated sin. To be sure there are now no longer any berries or any offspring, and the new harvest has not yet been gathered. But all values in this world with the exception of the souls of the blessed can be measured in coin. Thus you must pay me forty-seven gold coins and three coppers. Return to your home now—see, the sun is already setting; when it has sunk behind the mountains you must bring me this debt, lest the stars of the night be forced to remind you of it.”

Kerim fell on his knees and attempted to touch the hem of Aziz-khon's robe with his forehead. Aziz-khon jerked away.

“Have you heard?”

“The Protector knows that not a single copper is to be found in my house,” pleaded the Yakhbarian in despair.

“Beyond the Rakh-Davan Gorge lies a path to the city,” said Aziz-khon contemptuously. “And in that city stands a prison with bars as strong as the will of the Protector, and behind these bars are placed the sinners of this world. You can be sure, despicable one, that in the morning the honourable guard of the Seven Settlements will lead you down that path if you—”

Aziz-khon realized that Kerim would say no more, and that he would not even attempt to run away during the night. No one could wish to be punished for showing contempt for authority, and there was nowhere a poor man could hide in these hills where the name of every man was known to all.

“Go,” said Aziz-khon coldly, “and know that your fate depends upon your honour.”

Kerim got up, once more crossed his hands on his breast, muttered the usual formalities, and disappeared through the gates without glancing back.

8

“Now all things have been put in order,” thought Aziz-khon as he was getting ready to go to bed on the roof. To his mind came the words: “Not a thorn shall pierce the flesh without my desiring it. Not a thread shall be broken without my will! Great is the wisdom to be culled from books.” He took off his robe and his shirt, sat down on the blanket, and

for Ali, thou livest in grace and plenty. Far removed shall be thy life and thy possessions from all danger!"

*Her body is like quicksilver, her brows like the arc above
a niche,
Each of her bones is a source of delight—*

The verse would not come. Once more Aziz-khon gave a prolonged yawn, pulled the blanket over his head, turned over on his side, and made an effort to compare Nisso's hair with the threads tying the stars to the Third Heaven. Before he knew it, he was snoring.

Nisso heard this snoring in the dark empty room where she lay. All evening she had been tossing and praying as best she knew how. She knew no formal prayers or mysterious and divine words. But she believed in good and evil spirits, and that a person's dev followed his every movement. Ashtar-i-Kalon was the Great Dragon living in the waters of the Great River, and Nisso had a clear idea of what it was like from the description the old woman had so often given. It had the body of a snake with a tail as sharp as a needle, four short legs and a mane equal to a hundred beards. Above its jaws sprouted horns that were twisted like those of a mountain goat and branched like the backbone of a fish. Nisso believed that those who were devoured by the Dragon would never again see a living creature, and that their souls would be transformed into birds, snakes, fish, plants, or scorpions, depending on the amount of good and evil they had done in this life.

That evening Aziz-khon had said to her, "I shall come to you tonight; see that you are submissive. Your frail hands can avail you nothing against me."

At first Nisso had prayed for the death of Aziz-khon. "Now he is drinking tea. May it choke him to death.—Now he is getting up. May the earth open and swallow him up!—Now he is climbing the ladder to the roof. May the ladder break and he fall down, splitting his head open on a stone!—Now he has reached the edge of the roof. May a gust of wind blow him off!—May his dev become angry with him!"

But the old man did not choke, nor did he fall off the ladder, and no wind blew him off the roof. And as Nisso listened

to his senile muttering, yawning, and scratching, she was gripped by despair.

Then the thought struck her that when he came she must be very calm. He would fall asleep and she would place her fingers on his neck and choke him. But the old man did not come to her. He was sleeping soundly, as Nisso could tell by his even snoring. And once again, as during the day, Nisso realized that there was no other way out for her. She would have to let her soul be turned into a plant or a bird. Only not a snake. Or even worse—a scorpion. It might be turned into a scorpion! In that case she would crawl up to Aziz-khon and sting him! But it would be much better if it were turned into a bird. Then she could live on the very peaks of the mountains. But what kind of bird—a large one or a small one? A small one might be pecked to death by a vulture, while a large one—but after all her soul was a little one—it would hardly do for a large bird!

The main decision, however, had already been made: she would give herself up to the Great Dragon. God in His mercy would pity her and not turn her into something horrid. Had she been so very wicked in this life?

Nisso thought of the sky, of the sun, of the wind, of the distant snow peaks. Had she thought she was about to part with all these things forever, she might have been frightened. But she believed she would part only with people, and they were the worst that this life held. Everything else would remain.

Perhaps it would be terrifying to see the Dragon. Perhaps it would be so awful that it would be better to remain with Aziz-khon and give herself to him. After all, other people lived that way and had no desire to escape. There must be some reason for their excessive fear of Ashtar-i-Kalon.

But still there could be nothing in the world more loathsome and terrifying than Aziz-khon, who in spite of Nisso's prayers was still alive, who—

But now he was no longer snoring. She could hear him moving about on the roof. She could hear the shuffle of his slippers. Now he was coughing loosely and disgustingly. He had a coarse dirty beard.

Nisso no longer hesitated. She softly threw off the blanket, grabbed up her tunic and trousers, quickly pulled them

on, stole to the door and glanced listening into the darkness. She could scarcely hear for the beating of her own heart, but it seemed that all was quiet except for the rustling of leaves in the garden.

Nisso stole across the garden, keeping close to the wall, which she climbed to the left of the barred gates. Slipping down onto the path, she dashed down the slope in her bare feet with braids flying. Once in the valley, she stopped to catch her breath and listen.

All was quiet. No one was pursuing her. Not a dog barked. The only sound was the braying of a donkey somewhere in the distance. Nisso turned off the path onto a stretch of rocky ground and jumped from stone to stone until she reached the bank of the Great River. Fearing that she might change her mind if she hesitated, she ran along the bank to a cliff cutting out into the dark ribbon of water. The swift current near the cliff was split by great rocks about which the water foamed and roared, and it seemed to Nisso that she could see the black spine of Ashtar-i-Kalon among the foam. Her heart was pierced by a sharp thrust of fear, and she staggered back.

"Ah, you wretched girl! Where are you?"

Azis-khon's sharp cry ripped the silence of the night and thundered in echoes through the mountains. Nisso dashed back to the water's edge. There among the rocks flashed the white teeth of the Dragon. In the extremity of her terror, she gave a piercing shriek and threw herself into the yawning jaws.

Had she drowned at that moment, who could have denied that all had taken place in accordance with the old woman's tales about Ashtar-i-Kalon, and that the soul of Nisso had actually become transformed into a bird or a plant? But at the very moment when Nisso imagined that Ashtar-i-Kalon was swallowing her, she felt the familiar sensation of cold water and the lightness of the current bearing her away. Instinctively she made an accustomed movement of her arms, and this brought her to the surface, where she took a deep breath and began to swim.

The river carried her swiftly downstream. Nisso caught sight of the receding riverbank surmounted by the cliff on which the ancient serrated wall stood silhouetted against the starry sky. Instantly forgetting the Dragon, Nisso turned

resolutely and began to swim at right angles to the current which was carrying her further and further away from the bank. The fact that she was swimming in the swift cold water, that the bank was receding, and that there was nothing at hand to threaten her, filled her with boundless satisfaction and delight in a freedom of which she had long been deprived.

She wanted only one thing—to swim and swim and swim! To swim undisturbed, and as far as possible, without a thought in her head! To swim as she had swum in the waters of her native river; to swim, carefully watching for the foam surrounding approaching rocks, so that she might avoid them. Nisso's heart now beat with calm assurance. Her tunic and trousers did not hamper her. But the water was cold, and Nisso realized that her strength would soon be exhausted. She glanced about her, but the riverbank was out of sight. She was very cold. All her carefree joy suddenly disappeared and the strength went out of her arms and legs. Once more Nisso was filled with fear, but this time it was a different kind of fear—a fear which urged her to fight for life. Again and again she searched the dark expanse of water until at last she caught sight of the bank. It was quite close at hand, but her body had become heavy. Several times she had swallowed mouthfuls of water and her legs had become numb. When she could no longer force her muscles to work the water immediately closed over her head.

As soon as she submerged, Nisso struck out with her hands, came to the surface and took in a great gasp of air. Once more she disappeared under the water and once more came to the top. Realizing with horror that she was drowning, Nisso struggled forward, swimming with her last ounce of strength. Fortunately for her the riverbank at this point was approached by stony shallows, and suddenly Nisso struck her foot painfully against the bottom. Small rocks appeared all around her and the water which churned among them dragged her exhausted body along the rough bottom. She caught at the rocks but was unable to hold on. The current suddenly turned sharply away, leaving Nisso on the wet pebbles. With the expiration of her last strength, Nisso lost consciousness. The shallow stream laved her body, stirring the clothes that clung to her limbs and burying her outstretched arms in the sand. . . .

When she came to, Nisso raised her head with an effort and found herself on an empty, unfamiliar bank. She tried to crawl further up the bank, but she was too weak to lift even a finger. For a long time Nisso lay there with her eyes closed. Then she passed her hand over her forehead and hair, raised herself on her elbow, and finally sat up. Everywhere she saw only dark cliffs and an abandoned cove. She glanced across the Great River and far, far away on the opposite bank she noticed winking lights. She looked more closely. The lights were moving. Suddenly she realized that she had crossed the river, that the house of Aziz-khon was there on the other side, and that those lights were in his garden. They were searching for her! "But the Dragon? Has my soul been transferred into the body of a bird?"

For an instant Nisso was again gripped by fear, but she immediately shook it off with a short laugh. The coldness she felt was due only to the water!

Nisso felt her body. She was covered with cuts and bruises. She groaned with the pain in her back as she pulled herself up onto dry rocks. What if they should find her here? She tried to stand up, but lacked the strength. Stretching out on the ground, she began to crawl. Above her towered massive cliffs.

Nisso entered a deep shelter formed by overhanging slabs of granite. There she lay quietly until she was overcome by deep sleep.

9

The sun penetrated this spot only in narrow shafts of light. It was quiet, the constant murmur of the river serving only to emphasize the surrounding silence. Even in her sleep Nisso was conscious of the cold. She stretched herself and became aware of the wracking pain in her whole body. She thought of the warm sun which by this time must have heated the rocks. The overhanging granite prevented her from standing up. Nisso carefully touched two swollen, aching cuts—one below her left knee, the other on her right shoulder. They throbbed painfully. The rest of her body was covered with scratches to which her torn, wet clothes clung. She was seized with a chill. In the effort to overcome her weakness, she grasped her knees with her arms. If only she could have

a drink of milk! Or even better—a bowl of hot tea with salt and mutton fat in it! Strong, fat tea! But as she thought about this, she realized that there would be no more milk for her, and no more tea. What would there be? That was uncertain, but at any rate there was no one here whom she feared and no one whom she was obliged to obey. What should she do now? In reply to her question she stretched out and began to crawl, being careful not to strike her head. The narrow, winding passage of the shelter led her to the daylight. A burning ray of sun struck her cheek. Nisso stuck out her head and looked fearfully about. There was no one and nothing here but the rocks, with the dull grey waters of the Great River down below. She half closed her eyes with pleasure as she felt the warm caress of the sun filling her vision with dancing spots of red and green.

As she lay warming herself on a slab of granite, she began to think more calmly. At the foot of the mountains on the other side of the Great River she saw the green gardens of the village, while higher up was the cliff on which stood the hated house of Aziz-khon. What did they think had happened to her? Were they still searching for her? The village and orchards and riverbank seemed to be quiet and peaceful. People were moving among the crops in the fields. Nisso strained her eyes and made out a donkey loaded with a huge bundle of brush climbing up the path to the house of Aziz-khon. Behind the donkey walked someone in a black robe. No one was to be seen on the wall or roof of the house. How strange it seemed to be gazing at that house without an overwhelming fear of the old man! The sense of her independence was slow in coming. Nisso was struck by the thought that perhaps they could see her from the other side of the river, that perhaps they were even keeping track of her movements. Quickly she moved onto another stone which could not be seen from the opposite bank. Of course they would pursue her—was it thinkable that the accursed old man would leave her in peace? She must hurry and go further—as far as possible, no matter where, only to hide where not a single person could find her!

A path led along the riverbank, becoming lost to sight here, among the huge granite crags. Above the path towered a sheer cliff. Nisso was about to escape along this path when

she was stopped by the thought that once she left the rocks she would surely be seen. She began to study the face of the cliff with a searching, uneasy glance. It was doubtful that a person could avoid falling off its perpendicular rise. But Nisso did not hesitate: the only thought in her mind was to hurry and get as far away as possible.

First glancing around, she mounted the foot of the slope and then began to climb the cliff. Her fingers clutched the tiniest notch on the surface, the toes of her bare feet felt out the slightest protuberance, and her body, pressed close to the sun-warmed cliff, merged with its contour and froze motionless at threatening moments when she was about to lose her balance. Only a person unaffected by dizzying heights, one who had been born in those mountains and had become used to its precipices from almost the first day of life, could calculate the slightest movement of his body so instinctively, with every breath and every muscle. Nisso kept mounting higher and higher, hugging the sheer rock as though a magnet held her to it. When she had climbed some three hundred metres, she came to a narrow opening in the face of the cliff.

Here she stopped to catch her breath and glance down into the abyss, locking her arms about a lone tree which had forced its way between the rocks. A flush of colour stole to her cheeks. Her eyes shone and were filled with an expression of self-confidence. Nisso breathed deeply and freely, and for the first time in many months her face was lighted by a smile. Now no one could find her, no one could catch her!

After she had rested, she began to crawl further into the opening which was overgrown with brush. It widened out, and Nisso straightened up as she made her way among the ancient moraine. She was surrounded by hills formed of boulders, here and there overgrown with dry and yellowed grass. The sharp-toothed ridges and rocks wore patches of fine moss like bits of fur clinging to the mangy body of the mountains. A chain of higher mountains surrounded the moraine on three sides, while above its plateaus rose the summits of unscaled passes over wild and barren ranges separated by precipices whose depth could be only surmised.

At last Nisso was utterly alone and independent.

All day Nisso kept walking on, unmindful of the direction and of where she would spend the night. This day restored to Nisso the boundless freedom which is the possession of every mountain bird and beast, but which she had been deprived of by Aziz-khon.

Nisso walked over the stones, and every stone had its own form, and every stone lay in its own way. It was interesting to study these stones and discover their different shades of grey, russet, and brown with veins of white and spots of rose and black.

She walked over the coarse, dry, crackling grass of the slope. The grasses had various scents. It was pleasant to tramp over them with rough bare feet, and to sometimes bend down to examine a flower curled up by the wind or withered by the sun.

She walked along the beds of dried-up streams, sometimes sitting down to dig up a rock which had once fallen from above and now sheltered a tiny spring of transparent water to which she pressed her mouth and drank until she could drink no more.

When she became tired she lay down on the dry ground and gazed fixedly at the clouds moving slowly above the mountain peaks, shifting their form and colour, attenuating, breaking up into small masses, finally spreading over the whole heaven and vanishing in thin vapour.

She listened to the wind, which sometimes gave a prolonged, piercing whistle and brought a wave of cold, and at other times settled on the earth and absorbed the warmth of the stones.

Whenever a bird flew overhead Nisso watched its noiseless flight in fascination, hoping that it would come to rest somewhere nearby, placing its tiny feet on a stone, folding its wings and turning its downy head quite oblivious of Nisso's observation.

Sometimes a stone would roll down the mountainside. She would stop to watch it bounding over the earth, striking lightly against other stones until with a final sharp crack it would come to a standstill among its moss-covered fellows. Then she would continue on her way.

She was very hungry, but she tried not to think about food, pushing away the realization that she could not continue for long without nourishment. But when the sun moved into the western half of the clear blue sky she was gripped by such irrepressible hunger that she could think of nothing else. Gradually her surroundings ceased to interest her. She remembered the herbs called "schorsk" which she had boiled in Duob. But the dry grass in this place did not resemble "schorsk," nor could she find any edible greens on these slopes no matter how hard she searched.

In the course of the day, Nisso had climbed to a great altitude without being aware of it. Not far above her she caught sight of the first patch of unmelting blue snow. It lay in layers in shady fissures among the cliffs, above which the dark, lifeless eminences glittered in the sun. She approached one such patch which was sprinkled with fine rubble. Breaking off a crust of snow, she began to suck it greedily, no longer in a state to admire its large, starry crystals sparkling with sunlight. Then she continued on her way at the foot of a cliff until she came to a hollow filled with luscious grass. The ground was like a vivid, undulating green carpet, and for a long time Nisso wandered here, delighted by the colourful Alpine flowers. She stooped down to gather forget-me-nots, primulae, globe-flowers and poppies. But nothing was capable of distracting her attention from the torture of her hunger. She tried eating one of the delicate yellow flowers, but it turned out to be bitter. A cold wind blew down from the heights, and she began to worry about where she would spend the night. About her rose the deserted masses of the mountains covered with eternal snow. Nisso decided to descend through the hollow. Running ahead, she soon came to a spring, where she found some tall unfamiliar grass growing in small bunches. It turned out to be wild onion, and Nisso eagerly feasted on it. She followed the rivulet flowing from the spring, but soon the wild onion disappeared, as did all other grass, while the wind became colder and colder. Anxiety caused Nisso to quicken her steps. She was so tired that she no longer showed her former agility in leaping from stone to stone.

Beneath a towering cliff she found a heap of twisted horns, indicating that recently this had been the lair of wild rams.

The earth was dug up, hoof-prints remained in the dry clay of the soil, several skeletons with bits of hide clinging to them were piled up on top of each other. On touching one of the horns, Nisso heard a tiny squeak. Her curiosity was further aroused by a protruding tuft of russet wool. When she examined the horn she discovered two tiny foxes. They were so busy scratching and biting each other that Nisso could not lure them out. Realizing that there might be wolves and bears and panthers in this place, she hastened along the bed of the stream.

The sun was already slipping down toward the mountains. The rivulet grew ever wider, gradually forming a swift little stream. As she descended, Nisso was filled with the single desire to find warmth, and perhaps something to eat. However, evening found her still among the deserted rocks on the bank of the foaming river in a deep gorge cutting off a view of the summits. But already there were dwarfed bushes of wild rose, while from the cracks in the rocks peeped sprigs of willow. Exhausted by hunger and exertion, Nisso dropped down onto a stone and immediately fell asleep. During the night she was awakened by cold.

She could see the stars shining and hear the monotonous murmur of the river, but the darkness of the gorge was impenetrable. Nisso was filled with terror. She tried to fall asleep again, but was prevented by cold and fear. Haunted by thoughts of devils and dragons, she sat up and hugged her knees, staring into the darkness without daring to move. Her teeth chattered. She thought of a fire which might warm her, and of food which might fill her. She started at every sound, imagining that she heard strange, menacing voices above the monotonous purl of the river.

As soon as the darkness became less dense, so that the bushes and stones no longer appeared to be monsters of the night, Nisso's fears subsided and she started out once more. Her only desire now was to find people—any kind of people as long as they were strangers. She longed to see fires, and smoke rising from hearths. People must be found down there below, so she hurried along the riverbank. From time to time her path was cut off by overhanging rocks, and then she entered the swift icy water without hesitation, catching on to the cold stones and struggling with the current, which

kept lifting her off her feet. Nisso's body became red and the pain of her wounds increased.

For a long time the sun did not reach the gorge. When at last its rays fell on Nisso, a sensation of persistent cold alternated with thoughts of food. Nisso looked longingly at the water foaming among the rocks. A trout flashed in the sun, and Nisso determined to catch it at any cost. Creeping over to a large boulder, she lay in its shade and for a long time tried to catch the fish cavorting in the foam.

When this proved of no avail, she remembered the fish-net hanging on a nail in the home of Pavlavon-Nazar in Duob. Scrambling back onto the riverbank, she wove a sieve of willow twigs which, if less perfect than the net of Pavlavon-Nazar, nevertheless served her purpose.

Again Nisso lay down in the shadow of the boulder. Trout could be seen leaping here and there. Nisso selected a particularly large one and followed its movements carefully. Suddenly she let down her sieve and squeezed the fish against the rocks. In a trice the game was hers. She ran with it onto the bank, struck it hard against the rocks and greedily gobbled it up without so much as scaling it.

Now Nisso was more calm. She took off her clothes in order to warm herself in the sun, and once more set out on her way.

That day Nisso was not interested in birds and flowers and falling stones. She thought only about what she would do when she reached human habitation. But the lower she descended along the river, the more uncertain she became that it was wise to seek the company of human beings. Of course it would be better to get along without them, but how could she secure food and shelter alone?

Toward the end of the day the gorge widened out; the river gurgled among massive granite boulders and was now too deep to ford. But still there was no sign of human habitation, and Nisso was terrified by the thought that she might have to spend this night as she had the past one.

At dusk, when the sun had already set, Nisso caught sight of a small round stone structure with a pointed roof standing in a clearing. At first she thought it was a human dwelling,

and she stopped with mixed sentiments of joy and fear, not daring to approach. From behind the shelter of the rocks she looked closer and discovered that the building was a *mazar*, dwelling place of spirits and the dead. The *mazar* was surrounded by slender poles from which hung yak tails and bright rags, while the roof was ornamented with the horns of wild goats and rams. "Evidently people come here," thought Nisso, and resolved to be cautious. On approaching the *mazar*, she discovered that it was empty. The thought entered her head that she might find something to eat inside, for she knew that people sometimes brought cakes and oil to feed the souls of the dead. Perhaps the spirits had not consumed all that had been brought to them. But immediately her blood ran cold at the thought that she was contemplating robbing the dead. What if she should incur their wrath? The souls of the dead hovered about the *mazar*, so she would do well to keep her distance!

But the entrance was open, and nothing seemed to threaten her. With bated breath Nisso glanced in. All was quiet and empty. Two black stones were lying on the ground. Nisso could not make up her mind to cross the threshold. On one of the stones lay a stale millet cake. Nisso stared at it with excited longing. It required taking only a step and extending her hand. But her fear of the unknown was stronger than her hunger. She bit the finger that had involuntarily slipped into her mouth and retreated. With frightened glances behind to make sure she was not being followed, she moved toward the edge of the clearing. Sometimes she hesitated and turned back toward the *mazar*, then again retreated as fast as possible.

If only she could catch another fish! But night had already descended. The patch of sky visible between the walls of the gorge had become a winding road strewn with stars, while the night wind once more chilled the air. Exhausted by her labours and tortured by thoughts of the millet cake, Nisso sank down onto a stone along the riverbank. In spite of her exhaustion, she kept sitting there miserably, listening and peering into the darkness, her thoughts chained to the millet cake.

At last it became utterly dark; clouds blotted out the stars and filled the gorge. The wind increased, blowing in

violent gusts. In her thin, torn clothes, Nisso became frozen to the marrow. Suddenly a whistling wind brought a deluge of rain in its wake, and in her desperation Nisso ran into the mazar and threw herself down beside the black stone, huddling for warmth and to stop the chattering of her teeth.

The downpour increased. Now the wind no longer whistled, but howled, while the swollen river roared angrily. Nearly unconscious with fear, Nisso fell face down on the ground and gave herself up to an uncontrollable fit of despair. She sobbed as only those can sob who have been overcome by great misfortune.

Gradually Nisso became more calm. Her shoulders ceased shaking, her breathing became soft and even.

She had fallen asleep. . . .

The child woke up late the next morning, when the sun was already high in the heaven and the surrounding world was pleasant and smiling. Nisso jumped up on realizing that she was in the mazar, but this time she was not afraid. The millet cake continued to lie on the black stone in front of her. She had a look at it from all sides, then grabbed it up and escaped through the door, running along the bank of the river as though she were being pursued by a thousand demons. She did not dare glance behind her, but as she ran she chewed at the prize she had snatched from the souls of the dead. Realizing that nothing in the world had been changed by her act and that the sky was as calm and bright as ever, she stopped for breath. No, there was nothing at all that she need fear!

She broke the cake up into small pieces and devoured it to the last crumb. Then she drank her fill of water and continued unhurried on her way.

The terror of devils no longer existed for Nisso. The sky was blue and cloudless, the river was majestic in its untamed beauty, and the rocks and boulders stood solid and unmoving. What did Nisso care about invisible dragons and the souls of the dead soaring in some other world!





CHAPTER THREE

1

THE SIATANG RIVER, descending from its source among the glaciers, rushed through the canyon which in the course of tens of thousands of years it had cut through the mountains.

So broad and mighty that it defied crossing, it hurled its foaming waters against the foot now of one, now of another of the peaks rising above the gorge. It pushed its way through some of the rocky cliffs and sharply swirled around others. Its heaving waters bathed the terraced banks, leaving them bared to future generations as soon as it succeeded in cutting a deeper bed for itself. In washing away the steep slopes, it brought down thousands of tons of mountain rock, which crashed into its waters but left the river uncrushed, eternally alive and forever descending. When at last it passed through the final gates formed by rocky cliffs, it merged with its older sister, the Great River, which cleaves the world into two epochs, two historical eras, two governments so utterly unlike. There, on the other side of the Great River, lay Yakhbar, locked in by a chain of glacial mountains. During the course of the last twenty or thirty centuries the Siatang River had cleared a level, stone-strewn valley some fifteen miles from its mouth. It had then receded to a lower bed whose banks rose in rocky ledges above the water. The long, semicircular expanse of the valley was closed in by rocky cliffs jutting out into the rebellious waters. The steep walls of the canyon cut off the valley from the rest of the world, isolating it among chaotic masses of bare rocky mountains.

For that reason, people had lived in this valley from distant times.

These people were divided into castes. The highest caste was that of the *shans* represented by the Khans who ruled over these parts. The second highest was that of the *sayids*, servants of the living god, who were represented by pirs and khalifas. The inhabitants of Siatang prayed to the living god and sent him their taxes through the pir who lived with the Khan in the settlement of Siatang. The pir sent his assistant, the khalifa, to collect taxes in Duob, Zarkhok and other villages of the khanate. The sayids were considered to be "the shadow of god on the earth," and for that reason every demand of the pir and the khalifa was supposed to come from god himself.

Representatives of the Khan were to be found in every village. They came from the third caste, that of the *mir*s. From the fourth caste called *akobirs* were chosen the Khan's bodyguard. The lowest caste was that of the *raiat*s or faqirs, represented by all the peasants who toiled on the tiny stony fields in order to supply the upper classes with wheat, barley, millet, peas, mulberries and apricots, while they themselves went hungry.

The last Khan to live in the Siatang fortress built by his ancestors had died at the very moment when Siatang for the last time had been conquered by the Yakhbarians. Some pirs remained in Siatang even after the Russians came to the High Mountains and drove the Yakhbarians back into their khanate on the other side of the Great River. But the last of the pirs, in the company of prominent sayids, mirs and akobirs, abandoned Siatang when the news reached the High Mountains that the Russians had overthrown the tsar, and that a new code of laws was being brought to the mountains, a law violating that of the Preordained which had held sway from time immemorial. But the faqirs, calling themselves canyon-men, remained in Siatang. It was this settlement which gave its name to the river and to the entire region, including the neighbouring gorges of Duob and Zarkhok through which the same rivers flowed. The word "Siatang" may be translated as meaning "The Black Narrows."

In the winter the black and grey cliffs were covered with snow, which blew across the settlement, burying the paths and cutting off this region from the rest of the world. Every spring one could hear the roar of landslides and the crashing

of boulders. During the summer the air hung motionless in the gorge and became so heated by the rocks that it was almost impossible to breathe. Only in the autumn, when cool breezes blew down from the glaciers, did the canyon-men know the delight of fine weather, whose duration, however, was only too brief. Once more the winds became sharp and penetrating, bringing the cold of approaching winter. Winter was always met by the canyon-men with fear and resignation.

2

On one of the warm days of early autumn a crowd of men was gathered near the fortress of the former Khan. Actually this fortress, once mighty and menacing, had not existed as such for a long time. Of its former glory there remained only four stone walls smeared with clay and two high black towers with great zigzag cracks in them. One of the towers rose above the very river, which had almost washed away its foundation, so that it threatened to collapse along with the remainder of the wall. The second tower rose at the end of a wall bisecting the canyon, which at this point was narrow. Bulwarked as it was by the rocky base of the cliff, this tower still stood firm.

Between this tower and the cliff extended a narrow passage on which depended the entire existence of the settlement of Siatang, for here were located the rotting gutters of the only canal supplying the settlement with water. Since no large trees grew in Siatang, the heavy logs supporting these elevated gutters had once been brought with enormous labour across Yakhbar from distant provinces of the neighbouring state.

The beginning of the irrigation canal (or its "head," as they called it in Siatang) was located higher up, beyond the fortress.

Naturally it would have been much simpler to lay the canal across the territory of the fortress rather than up on the cliff, but the Khan who had built the fortress thought only of his own interests. He built a branch leading from the head of the large canal, through which he drained off as much water as he needed to irrigate a large orchard, run a mill and fill the pool in his courtyard. Only the water which remained

after his wants were satisfied flowed to the settlement. From his vantage point he could decrease or even entirely cut off the flow of water. As a tax for the use of the canal he took a fortieth part of the harvest of grain and fruit. The ravine between the towers and the cliff remained the only passageway between Siatang and the Upper Pasture. Everyone who used it was required to pay the Khan from two to five tube-teikafuls of grain. The water mill inside the fortress was the only one which the canyon-men could use, and for this privilege they were required to pay the Khan a tenth of their grain.

But the days of the Khans were over. Some years before a giant landslide had destroyed the Khan's residence, the pool, half of the orchard, and the third tower. A shapeless heap of jagged rocks now concealed them from view. The other half of the orchard had long since dried up. Only the old mill and an empty cattle-run still remained within the courtyard of the fortress. Here and there among the rocks were yet preserved deep, narrow-necked pits which had been dug for storing grain. But now they were all empty or half filled with debris.

With a great effort the canyon-men restored the gutters of only the main canal, directing some of the water to the mill for the use of which no one now demanded a tax.

The only resident of the fortress was the grandson of the last Khan, the sole remaining representative of the ruling caste of shaná, which had formerly represented the fathers of the tribe. This old, impoverished man named Bobo-Kalon was living out his last days in the arched interior of the upper tower which resembled a tomb. Whether he wished it or not, the "Great Old Man" became a caretaker, and everyone knew that of his own accord he kept the tower in order. However, he never spoke to the faqirs and he did all his work when there was not a living soul about; when people were around he was always idle, as though emphasizing the fact that it was disgraceful for members of his caste to work. To observers it seemed that the mill was kept in order by invisible spirits. The donations brought to Bobo-Kalon by certain of the canyon-men were mere marks of respect paid to this last descendant of the Khans.

The dilapidated, elevated gutters patched with felt and fastened with birch bark and clay, leaked more and more every

year. The water dripped through the cracks throughout the entire length of the canal, and even without this loss the gutters were too narrow to bring a sufficient supply of water to the parched stony soil of the tiny fields. Perhaps the inhabitants would not yet have undertaken the reconstruction of their canal had they not already become used to voluntarily obeying the man who had gathered them here today.

Even in the spring this man had often come to the courtyard of the fortress to examine the stones of the ruins, to measure and to calculate. At last he announced to the canyon-men that it was possible and essential to build a new canal lower than the original one. The only thing required was to remove the cliff on which the old tower stood. And when the canyon-men replied that they had no objection to removing the tower, but that there was no force on earth which could remove the cliff, he answered that there was such a force. This question was much discussed in the settlement of Siatang, but all the discussions ceased when at a meeting of the poorest, landless faqirs this man promised to irrigate the wastelands below the settlement covering a large part of the valley and to divide them among them.

They had undertaken this project together, and already work had been going on for several weeks.

At last, early in the autumn, the decisive day arrived. At break of dawn the faqirs came in their tattered robes worn over naked bodies, barefoot or in worn rawhide shoes, to gather dry thorn bushes on the sides of the mountains and bring them to the fortress.

At noon they were still piling the bushes around the foundations of the tower. Instructions were given by the man who was in charge whom they called Sho-Pir. He was tall and broad-shouldered and did not resemble the people of these mountains. Nor was he dressed like them. He was wearing high boots laced with rawhide, a faded khaki shirt and dark blue breeches reimbursed with goat hide. The five-cornered red star on his faded cap had lost most of its enamel. But even in this old, half-military attire, he was so neatly belted, so well-built, and so supple and unhurried in his movements that he created the impression of being well-dressed. His tanned face with its slightly turned-up nose was calm and self-confident.

Soon after his arrival in the settlement several years before, he had had a conversation with Bobo-Kalon, as a result of which Bobo-Kalon had sarcastically called him Sho-Pir, which means "Head of the Pirs." This nickname had stuck to him ever since, and no one in the settlement knew his real name. Bobo-Kalon, who lost his last vestige of influence over the faqirs soon after the arrival of the stranger, was convinced that the canyon-men pronounced the name Sho-Pir with the greatest respect. Who could have imagined that the newcomer would win such unquestioned authority in so short a time!

The lean, thin-legged canyon-men bent under their loads of bushes as they jumped quickly from stone to stone, while Sho-Pir gave directions in a pure Siatang dialect. Sometimes they would come to him and ask what they should do next. The frank, half-amused glance of his blue eyes told them that he was aware of their secret desire to have a well-earned rest, but that their hopes were in vain. It was necessary to keep on working. And he aimed such sharp sarcasm at the really lazy ones that the others immediately made fun of them. "Sho-Pir!" could be heard on every hand. "Where shall we put this?" "Sho-Pir, is this enough?" "Sho-Pir, let's stop gathering bushes and light the fire!"

But the man in the khaki shirt and breeches only laughed, calling for more bushes even though the pile already rose to one-third the height of the tower.

Meanwhile Bobo-Kalon, the white-bearded resident of the tower, sat on a stone at some distance, apparently indifferent to what was going on, glancing now at the river, now at his pet falcon ruffling its feathers on a metal perch encrusted with turquoise which was stuck into the ground in front of him. This tame old falcon, which served Bobo-Kalon for friends and relatives, grasped the perch in its cracked claws, raising first one and then the other foot with a light scrape along the metal. It would gaze with round, indifferent eyes at its master, twist its head with an air of importance, and from time to time lazily lift a wing and thrust its beak underneath to peck among the yellowed feathers. Sometimes the face of old Bobo-Kalon, full of the beauty and majesty of old age, would be moved by pity and the desire to help the falcon; at such times he would touch the bird's feathers

with the curved yellow nail of his little finger. And with this nail, which was at least as long as the beak of the falcon, Bobo-Kalon would scratch the side of the decrepit bird, paralyzing it with ecstasy, after which it would again blink into the eyes of the old man with an air of cold importance.

In no way did Bobo-Kalon betray his attitude toward what was being done to his ancient residence. When a few days earlier Sho-Pir had politely but firmly told him that the people had decided to tear down the old tower and destroy the cliff in order to build a new canal through the fortress, the old man had said after only a minute's hesitation:

"All things have changed of late. It is the people who need it and the people who decide. It will be unpleasant to live in the lower tower which is being washed away by the river, but I shall do so. I doubt that I shall outlive its stones!"

Some canyon-men who were not helping with the work had also gathered at this place. They consisted of those who had no interest in Sho-Pir's project because their land lay close to the old canal. They likewise consisted of those who secretly sympathized with Bobo-Kalon and felt that he was being unjustly humiliated. Bobo-Kalon was considered the most distinguished and the wisest among all those who respected the order which had reigned through the ages. In fact he was called the Guardian of Wisdom and the Interpreter of the Preordained.

Not all the people who sympathized with Bobo-Kalon had gathered here. Many of them did not wish to further injure the pride of the Khan's grandson by witnessing this latest insult. But those of them who could not restrain their curiosity had taken up places on the rocks surrounding the tower and were patiently awaiting the unprecedented spectacle which Sho-Pir was preparing for them. They sat like ravens on the rocks, maintaining an expectant silence.

The sun blazed mercilessly. The burning rocks pulsed with heat. At the foot of the tower laboured the sweating canyon-men, glancing sometimes with envy, sometimes with hate at those who were sitting, watching them disapprovingly. Naturally it was not easy to work under the glances of those coldly critical eyes. But their work represented a challenge

flung to the supporters of the Preordained, as well as the latest confirmation of the authority of Sho-Pir. Which meant that they must work tirelessly until Sho-Pir was satisfied.

The day advanced, and already the tower was half buried in bushes. Only the edge of the wall supporting the tower on the fortress side had not yet been stacked, and one by one the men dropped their loads at this spot.

Sho-Pir glanced at the tower and called to one of the men who had just thrown down his bushes:

"Enough, Baktior! Tell everyone to get away! We shall light it now!"

The one to whom these words were addressed—a young, black-eyed canyon-man, as lean as all the men of Siatang—stood up on the edge of the wall and cried: "Go below, everybody! Get away, Karashir! Get away, Hudodod! Climb down, Issof!" Then with a glance out of the corner of his eye at the spectators disposed on the rocks, he suddenly interposed a clumsy Russian sentence into his Siatang speech: "Sho-Pir! These many fool—we let them have heat, yes?"

Baktior lived with Sho-Pir and had learned to express his thoughts in broken Russian. He was the only one of the canyon-men who understood a word of Sho-Pir's tongue.

"No sense in waving a red flag in front of a bull!" answered Sho-Pir. "They too must leave. You tell them so. And hurry up and climb down yourself." Sho-Pir once more reverted to the Siatang dialect. "Everyone down below! We shall rest for the present! Get your pipe going, Karashir!"

With a wave of his hand Baktior ordered the curious ones to get away while he himself ran down to join those who had gathered around Sho-Pir. Unhurriedly the supporters of the Preordained abandoned their posts.

Sho-Pir went up to the pile of brush and struck a match. Bobo-Kalon placed his hand on the back of the falcon and stared intently at the flames which started up. The fire spread quickly and a cloud of black smoke swirled above the dancing tongues of flame. The canyon-men watched it silently. The smoke rose ever higher, the flames began to roar, and the heat forced the spectators to retreat. Sho-Pir stood with his arms crossed, silently admiring the force of the fire.

Soon the ancient tower was entirely engulfed in flames and the smoke filled the canyon, climbing in dark waves up

the sides of the cliffs. Frowning and covering their eyes with their hands, the spectators leaped from rock to rock and gathered at the gutter of the canal.

The flames leaped and hissed and roared, hiding the tower from sight. Only for brief instants did its black stones become visible.

The frightened falcon tried to fly away, but Bobo-Kalon held down its wings so that it had to remain on its perch with its streaming, bulging eyes closed. Bobo-Kalon himself watched the fire as though he were watching phenomena familiar and understandable to him alone. The dark, unwinking eyes of the old man were utterly calm.

"Enough, friends!" called Sho-Pir at last. "You have seen enough! Let it burn while we have a rest! Where is your pipe, Karashir?"

A pale, stocky, indescribably dirty faqir pulled himself reluctantly away from the sight, knelt down on the ground, quickly dug a hole and filled it with coarse home-grown tobacco. Sho-Pir and the canyon-men who had worked with him sat down around the hole. Karashir thrust in a short straw and lighted the tobacco with a live coal which had fallen near by. After placing a flat stone over the hole, he leaned over and took the end of the straw in his mouth, sucking energetically. Tobacco smoke curled out of the hole, and one by one the canyon-men lay face down on the ground and had a draw at the straw. Only Sho-Pir took out his own pipe, filling it with the same sort of tobacco.

"Happiness!" mused Bobo-Kalon as he watched the enormous, roaring flames. "What do those people understand about happiness? Does a stone seek happiness? Does water seek happiness? All has been preconceived by the Protector, whose soul pervades stones and men, wind and clouds. But man imagines that he has been created different from all things and creatures. He imagines that he is different from the frogs delighting in still waters, or the snakes warming themselves on hot stones, or the billowing clouds, or the trees which have their own wisdom concealed in their green boughs. And in his foolish unrest he would presume to live a different life. Why should he wish to change everything according to his desire? Why should he seek happiness?"

The old man stroked the coarse feathers of the falcon with his dry fingers, while the bird eagerly leaned forward to receive this unexpected caress.

Having had his third turn at the straw, Karashir sighed with satisfaction, glanced at the tower which was still enveloped in flames, and turned his eyes to the curious non-participants who had now gathered on a ledge of the cliff where the waters of the canal fell from the gutter in a noisy cascade, proceeding to the settlement through a ditch lined with stones. They too had gathered in a circle, and having decided that no event, however remarkable, should distract one from the basic demands of life, had chosen a flat rock on which they were laying out pieces of barley cake, apples, and mulberry *khalva*.¹

Karashir's eyes lighted up painfully as he caught sight of the food. This skinny, sinewy faqir was wearing the shreds of a sheepskin robe made of worn, unmatched pieces of hide sewn in some places with the wool inside, in others with the wool outside. Under the robe he tucked his bandy legs swimming in large top-boots in the last stage of dilapidation and held on by strings tied around his ankles. The tattered sheepskin in no way covered his nakedness: the sun played on ribs covered with tight brown skin, on a hollow stomach and thin hairy arms with dirt caked at the elbows. Karashir looked like a mummy. He could scarcely have been more than thirty, but his pale, greenish face with its expression of woe and weariness gave no hint of his true age.

"You must be hungry, Sho-Pir," said Karashir suddenly.

"Why, Karashir, have you some cheese and cakes to offer me?" asked Sho-Pir with gentle irony.

"I suppose he has an extra piece of juicy meat hidden under his sheepskin," smiled Hudodod, youngest of the canyon-men sitting around Sho-Pir.

Everyone laughed. Karashir's large, dark eyes with heavy circles under them suddenly flared up with a sense of pride which was in complete contrast to his wild and miserable appearance.

"I have nothing, but he must have everything for us, once he represents Soviet power and has asked us to work! Have you not brought some cakes and meat and cheese for us, Baktior?"

¹ Khalva—Oriental sweet paste made of nuts or fruit.

Baktior was Chairman of the Siatang Village Soviet. He calmly unwound his woollen sash, opened his clean white robe revealing the Yakhbarian vest he wore underneath, and untied a small bundle fastened there.

"Yes I have. Baktior has everything these days! He has no meat or cakes, but he has this!"

The bundle contained a few balls of goat's cheese and some sun-dried mulberries, which Baktior placed carefully on a stone.

Immediately the workers' hands stretched towards the food; Sho-Pir took only a few berries.

"Ah, Sho-Pir," said Karashir thoughtfully as he filled his mouth with dry, sour cheese. "Soon we shall have gathered the entire harvest, and there will be little grain—very little grain. There will be famine this winter."

"We shall have nothing to fear from now on. With this new canal our harvests will be entirely different."

"That will help next year. But this year?"

"This year? True enough, this year we should go hungry if it were not for—. We have Hudodod to thank for taking our letter to the *Volost*.¹ Now we shall not have long to wait. A caravan will come bringing flour and many other things. You, for example, have never seen many of the things that caravan will bring. No one in these mountains has ever seen such things."

"Hm, Sho-Pir," grunted Karashir doubtingly. "We cannot tell whether that caravan will come or not. A Russian caravan has never yet come to our mountains, and in the meantime we shall go hungry. I must confess that when Bobo-Kalon was rich and I worked for him, I was not always hungry. Now he is hungry himself. See him sitting there like a stone, watching the big fire? But in those days I was hungry only if he became angry with me. He always gave me at least something if he was in a good mood. But now? You do not beat me. You do not spit in my face. I work for you, for the Soviet power, and you keep on promising me and promising me, but so far you have given me nothing."

"Soviet power is our power, Karashir. Yours and mine. You do not work for me."

¹ *Volost*—Regional centre.

"Ee-yo! What do you say? You are a good man. You have clear eyes that tell the truth. I work for you like all of us work for you. But is your own stomach full? Our power, you say? Very good. Call it our power, but what has it given us?"

"Wait a bit. If you work hard it will give you everything," said Sho-Pir dryly, turning with a frown toward the tower where the flames were subsiding.

"And I shall tell you something else!" continued Karashir undaunted. **"The caravan is on the way. Very good. Hudodod brought us the answer that the caravan has set out. But how will it get here? There are places along our road that a pack horse cannot pass."**

"As soon as we find out that the caravan has arrived at the Volost, we shall fix the bad places along the road and help the horses over them. That is clear to everyone except you."

"It is clear to me too," muttered Karashir sadly. **"The time will come, the caravan will come, and we shall do as you say. But right now, Sho-Pir, would it not be better to take some grain from the merchant? We can always pay it back."**

"Once more harping on the merchant!" exclaimed Sho-Pir, raising his voice in impatience. **"Has Mirso-Hur laid his hands on so few of your possessions? Half of the settlement is in debt to him! When you gather your berries, you turn them over to him; when you harvest your grain you turn it over to him; all your wool you turn over to him! Mirso-Hur is just waiting for you to come to him! Do you not know Mirso-Hur? Always sticking your own head under the millstone! Well, go ahead and let him grind your dry skull into powder! I don't wish to hear any more about him!"**

"There is your unrest for you!" thought Bobo-Kalon, catching snatches of the conversation from where he was sitting. **"At last the infection has reached my people, who have always been distinguished in this respect from all others. This unrest has been passed like a dreadful disease from man to man, from tribe to tribe, from people to people. The whole world has become ill and mad. It has fallen under the power of the devs and is powerless to escape them. Until the present my people were the only ones that the Protector aided, may his name be blessed forever! He gave them the High Mountains for their home. He protected them with heights reaching to the skies, with snows unmelting in the sun, with cliffs un-**

scalable by human beings. The only means of communication he gave us are the steep narrow trails which we alone have skill in climbing. Yet throughout the ages people have come to us over these trails. Why have they come? Probably in search of happiness. But have they ever remained among us? Never. They either died or returned from whence they came. They would say: 'Your air is too rare for us to breathe. Your winds are too cold. The rays of your sun are too burning. We cannot endure all this. We thought that you possessed spacious lands, but we find that this is not so. We thought we should discover riches among you, but you are naked and beggars. You have only ice, snow, rocks, and wild waters. And you yourselves are wild. We can have no interest in you for you are an unfortunate people whom god has forgotten!' Thus they spoke and went away, taking with them the infection of unrest. For thousands of years it continued thus, and we laughed at them. But now the infection of unrest has penetrated to my people and everything on earth is collapsing, just as my tower is about to collapse."

"Get up, Karashir! You have rested long enough," said Sho-Pir, knocking the ashes out of his pipe. "We must all get up, friends. See, the fire is dying down. Now we must take poles and rake it to one side. We can let it burn around the edges of the cliff, but we must clear the centre. It is red hot by this time. Come with me to the canal, Baktior. And watch out, everybody, when I let the water through. Keep your distance or you may get badly burned by the steam. Come on!"

The canyon-men got up, collected long poles, surrounded the fire and began to scrape the burning brush to the edge of the cliff on which the tower stood. The smoke had long since dispersed and hung like a dark fog over the canyon. The wreaths of smoke which rose from the raked fire no longer encircled the blackened tower.

Sho-Pir and Baktior climbed to the gutter of the canal which was just opposite the tower. It was necessary to turn it in such a way that the cold water would rush directly onto the hot rock. Sho-Pir had prepared ropes, props and supports, and all had been exactly calculated. When the centre of the cliff had been cleared, leaving the glowing rock naked, Sho-Pir ordered everyone to stand back. He pushed the stone support

from under the lower end of the gutter, while Baktior pulled on a rope, which swung the gutter around at a right angle and left it hanging suspended in the air. Grabbing hold of the rope, Sho-Pir helped Baktior let the gutter down slowly until the end came to rest on a stone support.

The stream of water which rushed through the gate vanished in a hissing cloud of steam. Covering his face with his hands, Sho-Pir jumped back to a safe distance.

When at last the steam disappeared and the water poured over the cooled stone, putting out the remnants of the fire, everyone noticed a long, serpentine crack cutting the cliff in two. Sho-Pir had not erred in his calculations. The crack extended beneath the very tower, and was sufficiently wide, as proved by the fact that half of the cliff had settled under its own weight. And while the tower still stood firm, Sho-Pir realized that the first half of his project had been successfully carried out.

One at a time the spectators started towards the tower, but with an authoritative gesture Baktior waved them back. He obviously enjoyed being obeyed by those who hated him and who took every opportunity to stress, with undisguised contempt, that in spite of his being the representative of local authority, he remained no more and no less than the most beggarly and despicable of faqirs, in addition to which he was a violator of the Preordained, which made him no better than an infidel.

Bobo-Kalon remained sitting on a rock near the lower tower in a state of immobility which only the inhabitants of wild mountains are capable of retaining for such long hours at a time. His eyes were focused upon the ground as though he were reading secret invisible signs there. Now the falcon was seated on his shoulder with its feathers ruffled up, displaying the same air of concentration as its master.

3

The moment for undertaking the final and decisive task had come. Sho-Pir and Baktior went down to the river. Here among the stones on top of the steep bank were stored ten dried pumpkins filled with gunpowder. For the sake of this gunpowder Sho-Pir had swallowed his dislike for the Yakhba-

rian merchant Mirso-Hur, who had chosen the settlement of Siatang for his trading centre.

The inhabitants of Siatang, like those of other regions in the surrounding mountains, never traded at markets. They made all the essentials of life themselves, including clothes, implements, and dishes. Whatever they could not make they bought from the merchant. Mirso-Hur had settled in Siatang some eight years before, and by this time there was not a native who was not in debt to him.

Sho-Pir had for this gunpowder been forced to apply to the merchant. Mirso-Hur had taken a nice price for the attractive cans marked with foreign labels, and since for some time Sho-Pir had been without any money, he had been obliged to become Mirso-Hur's debtor like the rest of the inhabitants of Siatang. Sho-Pir promised to pay the merchant interest, which he counted on settling along with the cost of his purchase as soon as the first Soviet caravan reached Siatang.

Sho-Pir had transferred the gunpowder from the cans to the large pumpkins, and at dawn of this very day had placed them here at the river.

Taking all ten of the pumpkins, Sho-Pir and Baktior went toward the tower. Sho-Pir placed them in the crack of the cooled rock, four of them under the very tower. Then he added fuses of lengths calculated to set off all the powder simultaneously. Finally he ordered everyone to go to a safe distance and hide behind the rocks.

Only Bobo-Kalon remained sitting where he was as though oblivious of what was transpiring around him. But as soon as Sho-Pir approached him with his long, easy stride, the old man got up and raised his right hand imperiously in anticipation of the words he would be expected to listen to.

"I know, Sho-Pir," he said. "The time has come for you to set off the gunpowder. But your time is at your own disposal, so be so kind as to wait a moment. When a man is about to lose the sight of his eyes, he wishes to have a last look at the world. I wish to climb the tower."

The old man's tone expressed neither request or complaint; his words were spoken with a confidence which excluded the possibility of refusal. Sho-Pir gazed intently at Bobo-Kalon, and his silence gave consent.

Bobo-Kalon was the only man in the settlement whose height equalled that of Sho-Pir, and now he walked tall and straight toward the tower, with the falcon balancing on his shoulder and occasionally flapping its wings. Sho-Pir turned to his men, answering their inquiring glances with the brief words, "We shall wait a bit." Again filling his pipe, he sat down on a stone next to Baktior.

Bobo-Kalon mounted the uneven stone steps and came out on the wall of the fortress. Lightly holding on to the flagging of the tower, he continued climbing step by step until he came to the top landing. The last ledge was so high that the old man had to pull himself up on his hands, but his muscles were still strong enough to enable him to perform this feat without so much as interrupting the train of his thoughts. The falcon flew off his shoulder and came to rest on the edge of the landing, where it turned and waited for its master.

Once on the landing, Bobo-Kalon drew himself up to his full height. Once more the falcon fluttered up to his shoulder. With only a passing glance at the snow-capped peaks from which the Siatang River flowed, Bobo-Kalon turned his eyes toward the settlement spread along the valley below the fortress.

Everything there was familiar to Bobo-Kalon—the smoke rising lightly from hearth fires, the huge boulders larger than the houses, larger even than some of the orchards. Many of them had fallen on the settlement during the lifetime of Bobo-Kalon, and he could remember the people, cows, donkeys and chickens whom they had crushed.

Bobo-Kalon did not need to look down there in order to picture every house and every tree in the settlement. The sight of one small orchard and the house which glanced through the trees was like a knife in his heart. This orchard grew near the spring on a hill above the village, and was at quite a distance from all others. And the house did not resemble the other houses of the village, which looked more like black tombs than anything else. This house had windows and high doors. It was built according to the laws of the infidels. It had made its appearance quite recently, only two years before. It was the home of Baktior and his friend, the newcomer whom Bobo-Kalon had ironically dubbed "Sho-Pir."

"A centre of infection," thought Bobo-Kalon. "And its

inhabitants are the ones who are spreading this infection. There they are, sitting with their followers, people who are possessed by devs. They sit there looking at me and smoking their tobacco, waiting like vultures for me to come down. Then they will say: 'We did not disturb your prayers, respected grandson of the Khan!' As though they could understand my wisdom! They keep looking at me with their treacherous eyes; they find it amusing; they are laughing!"

Pretending that he was still gazing into the distance, Bobo-Kalon half closed his eyes and watched the canyon-men sitting in a circle on the stones below. The old man trembled with indignation as he listened to their laughter, and while he was unable to distinguish their words, he felt keenly that they were talking about him and laughing at him. At him, Bobo-Kalon, born into the caste of the shaná, grandson of the last of the Khans! And he was being forced to leave the tower of this fortress built by slaves for Khans, a tower which in a few minutes was destined to collapse! He must leave of his own free will, and not wait until those faqirs should display their impatience by rudely ordering him to leave. Better to die than to endure the insults of the faqirs, to take orders from the despicable caste of slaves!

He would leave presently. Just one more minute. One more minute while the tower still rose above the settlement, like the thousands of years of the past rose above this single day snatched by the devil from accumulated time. And the old grandson of the Khan remained standing there in his white robe embroidered in silk letters. He remained standing there, and he was so consumed by hate that he could no longer give himself up to a contemplation of god and devs, happiness and the Preordained, human beings and the vast reaches of time. . . .

"We have been sitting here long enough," said Baktior with annoyance. "Why should he keep standing there holding up our work while we sit around like fools waiting for him? You have already smoked two pipes. You yourself said we had to hurry, Sho-Pir." Suddenly turning to the tower he cried, "Hey there, you shaná! Come on down!"

"Leave him alone, Baktior!" said Sho-Pir calmly from where he was lying on the rocks. "What do an extra five minutes mean? We have nothing to lose. The evenings are

long. The sun is still high. See how beautiful the tower looks right now."

"Who can fathom your heart, Sho-Pir?" said Baktior with dissatisfaction. "Of what are you thinking now? It is time to finish our work!"

"Of what am I thinking?" mused Sho-Pir. "I am thinking of your happiness, Baktior! And of yours, Karashir. You had better change that sheepskin of yours. Would it really be so difficult to sew all your patches on the same side? Just wait until the caravan comes. Then we shall put you into a pair of Russian pants, a white shirt, and handsome boots!"

Everybody laughed and started poking Karashir in the ribs. He twisted away and looked offended.

Those who were sitting at a distance and had devoted the entire day to the satisfaction of their curiosity, impatiently awaited the end of the spectacle. To be sure, some of them had curled up on the warm stones and were fast asleep, certain that the others would wake them up when the moment came.

Bobo-Kalon slowly descended the tower. A ray of the setting sun slid off the last stone. Without a glance to either side, the old man walked past those who were sitting there, while they silently followed him with their eyes. He passed around the mill and went to the lower tower leaning over the river, where he opened the arched door and slammed it behind him.

4

Sho-Pir got up, and the canyon-men left their places to hide behind the boulders piled below the fortress.

Touching a match to the oil torch he had prepared for the occasion, he went over to the fuses sticking out of the crack and quickly lighted them. Then he threw away the torch and stood watching the serpentine flames while he counted out the seconds.

The fuses burned with a crackling sound. Sho-Pir cast an experienced eye over the cliff and the tower which would be blown to pieces within two and a half minutes. He did not hurry, knowing that he would have plenty of time to run to shelter one minute before the explosion. But the canyon-men hiding behind the rocks were uneasy.

"Sho-Pir!" cried Baktior. "Eh! Hurry up, Sho-Pir!"

But he enjoyed standing there motionless, calmly counting the seconds. He glanced into the ravine between the tower and the cliff. Through the gutter above flowed a thin stream of water. And there to his horror Sho-Pir suddenly caught sight of a pair of black eyes watching him intently from behind the jagged edge of the tower.

"Hey! Who are you!" he cried out in alarm, and the black eyes immediately disappeared.

Without a moment's thought Sho-Pir rounded the tower in three jumps and threw himself on the unknown girl crouching against the wall. She drew back in fright, but he held her firmly by the shoulders and shouted in Russian:

"Are you mad to be here!"

The girl resisted with unexpected fury,⁷ but Sho-Pir snatched her up in his arms and dashed away while she scratched and bit at him like a little wildcat.

Only when he had dropped behind a pile of rocks at a safe distance from the tower did he let the girl go. Immediately the tower rose in a flash of fire and a cloud of smoke. Fragments of stone whistled above Sho-Pir's head. The echoes rebounding from the steep walls of the canyon rolled and died away, only to be repeated at some great distance. Huge pieces of exploded cliff rolled down the slope to the river, sparing the mill, but tearing up the last trees remaining in the Khan's orchard and crashing against the end of the wall jutting out above the river. The whole mass plunged down into the water below, which immediately closed over the gigantic pieces of rock and continued on its way, swirling and foaming as ever. The dust of the explosion gradually settled down, the smoke dispersed, silence returned to the canyon, and Sho-Pir could detect only the acrid odour of burnt nitre.

When he was convinced that everything was over, Sho-Pir glanced at his scratched and bloody hands. Turning angrily to the girl he said:

"What do you mean by that? Have you gone completely mad?"

She sat submissive, no longer trying to run away. The canyon-men forgot the explosion as they crowded curiously around Nisso, and even Bobo-Kalon peered at her through a crack in the door. Sho-Pir noted her swollen, lacerated legs, her numerous matted braids, her dirty face and the rags of

her clothes, which did not resemble those worn in these parts.

Nisso dropped her eyes in the presence of all these people and sat huddled up like one caught in a trap. She had been so stunned and terrified by the explosion that her hands and lips still trembled.

"Was it a dev that brought you here?" laughed Sho-Pir at last. Then turning to the canyon-men he said, "Have a look. Does anyone know her?"

The canyon-men replied with a clicking of tongues and a shaking of heads.

"So you refuse to say anything?" said Sho-Pir after a pause. "Do you think we are used to having girls like you rain down on us every day? You should see your face! A cat could make a nice meal on the dirt of it!"

The canyon-men laughed. With a frightened glance from beneath her lashes, Nisso hung her head still lower. Sho-Pir took pity on her.

"You must be hungry," he said. "Do you want something to eat?"

Nisso made no reply. Sho-Pir winked to Baktior, who took the remaining ball of cheese out of his bundle. Touching Nisso's hand, Sho-Pir said:

"Do not fear, little mouse. No one will hurt you. Here, eat this."

Nisso once more glanced about her suspiciously, but being reassured by the obvious sympathy in the eyes of those who surrounded her, she greedily took the cheese and stuffed it into her mouth without looking up.

Sho-Pir carefully touched one of Nisso's swollen ankles, but she pulled away her foot.

"It looks as though you have been tussling with a panther. But don't worry, we shall fix you up. Can you walk?"

The minute Sho-Pir got up and would have lifted Nisso by the elbow, she jumped up and rushed to one side. The canyon-men laughed and formed a close circle to keep her from getting away.

"Sho-Pir! She must be possessed!"

Once more Nisso became submissive, and stood trembling in the hands of those who held her.

"Evidently she has had a bad time of it," said Sho-Pir.

"We shall have to take care of her. Our work is over for to-day. It is time to go home. As for you, silly," he said, addressing Nisso in a tone of affectionate banter, "You must not be afraid of us. Why in the world should you shy away from people as though they were wolves? Come on below with us!"

She went down the path leading to the village surrounded by canyon-men. But all the while she kept glancing about her as though seeking an opportunity to run away. Sho-Pir touched her shoulder lightly with his hand. Baktior led the procession, while the idle people who had watched the events of that day tried to push closer to Nisso, urged by a curiosity as to her mysterious appearance which had entirely supplanted their interest in the blowing up of the tower. Everything about her interested them—her torn clothes, unlike those which their women wore, her frightened eyes, the cuts showing through the rags on her sun-browned body, and her delicate face, which was beautiful in spite of the dirt caked on it.

The canyon-men whispered to each other their guesses as to who she might be. Perhaps she had been travelling with her father or husband and some misfortune had overtaken them on the road. Perhaps a boulder had fallen down and thrown their donkey over a precipice. Perhaps a panther from the region of the snows had fallen upon them. Or perhaps those with whom she had been travelling had drowned while fording the river. Cuts and bruises such as those she was covered with resulted from being buffeted against the rocks in the river. Or perhaps she had simply fallen behind some merchant's caravan and become lost in the mountains. But the most baffling fact was that she had arrived from above. Everyone knew that beyond the path leading to the Upper Pastures there was nothing but snow and ice.

Other people joined the curious crowd when they reached the village. The women, not daring to run out of their yards while the men were there, peered at Nisso over the high stone fences or climbed up on the roofs and glanced through the thick branches of the trees. Sho-Pir led Nisso past the gardens and orchards of the village without paying any attention to the crowd. The followers thinned out as he turned up the narrow path leading to the home of Baktior. When he reached the stone fence enclosing the garden around Baktior's house,

he turned around and faced the people, who stopped in indecision.

"There is no reason for staring at this girl as though she were a wild animal, comrades," he said impressively. "Who will be responsible if she dies of fright? Go to your homes. For the present she will remain with Baktior's mother. When she has thoroughly rested, Baktior, as the representative of Soviet power, will have a talk with her."

Sho-Pir led Nisso into the garden and placed two knarled sticks across the opening in the wall which served as a gate.

The canyon-men reluctantly turned back, leaving a few of the most curious with their eyes glued to cracks in the wall, determined to watch the spectacle to the very end.

Sho-Pir took Nisso over to a grass plot between mulberry trees next to the house where she sank down weakly, dropping her head on her hands.

"Baktior, go tell Gulriz to heat some water and melt some fat—the fat I saved for greasing my gun. We shall have to doctor up the girl. And tell Gulriz to come here."

When Baktior had gone in search of his mother, Sho-Pir spoke to Nisso in that smooth Siatang dialect which for three years had taken the place of his native Russian, a language no one in these parts understood.

"First we shall doctor your cuts, then you will have a drink of tea or milk. After that you will wash yourself. Have you ever had a wash? Then you will go to sleep. No one will harm you. You have nothing to be afraid of. Here, look at me. Do you think you should be afraid of me?"

Nisso glanced shyly from beneath her lashes into the face of Sho-Pir.

"See?" he smiled. "You and I understand each other perfectly, but you refuse to speak, as though you had lost your tongue!"

"Are you not a Yakhbarian?" whispered Nisso uncertainly.

"I? Of course not. Do I look like one?" asked Sho-Pir, tossing his faded cap on the grass.

Nisso now looked with a clear, open gaze at his close-cropped fair hair and his calm sunburned face. She was embarrassed by his laughing blue eyes.

"You—you are frivolous!"

"Frivolous? Oho!" laughed Sho-Pir whole-heartedly. "You call me frivolous? Well, well! That's a good one! Frivolous!" Then, restraining his laughter, he asked with pointed indifference, "And you—was it from Yakhbar that you ran away?"

Nisso sighed and dropped her eyes, but made no reply. At this moment Baktior came from the house with a can containing the melted fat in one hand and a clay pitcher of cold water in the other.

"Gulriz must have gone somewhere. Here is the fat. I put some more water up to heat."

Sho-Pir set to work cleaning Nisso's injuries without asking any more questions. The girl submissively held out her arms and legs for treatment. After carefully washing the cuts with cold water and grass which he substituted for cotton, Sho-Pir gently rubbed them with mutton fat. Gradually Nisso's head sank on her breast, and when Sho-Pir saw that she had fallen asleep he lifted her lightly in his arms like a little child and carried her into the house. He took her into his own room and stopped at the bedside, glancing dubiously at the clean sheets and then at the dirty face of the girl sleeping so peacefully in his arms. Nothing, apparently, could awaken her. With a shake of his head he placed her on the quilt and stood watching her for a second before he tiptoed out of the room.

The three inquisitive canyon-men who had been peering through the fence saw Sho-Pir come out of the house alone, which meant that the performance was over.

"Now he will take her to wife," muttered one of them with a smirk.

"Only the Protector can say," replied another. "Maybe she already has a husband."

"If she has, he will find her and kill her," laughed the third as the three wrapped their robes about them and reluctantly moved away.

Baktior rose from the grass to meet Sho-Pir. . . .

It was late that evening when Gulriz, the mother of Baktior, came home. On discovering the unexpected guest, she tried to find out who she was and where she had come from, but neither her son nor Sho-Pir could tell her. She undressed the sleeping Nisso, covered her with a blanket, put out

the light and went to the spring to wash the girl's torn clothes.

This was the first time in her life that Nisso had ever slept in a bed. And the bed was the only one in the entire region of Siatang. Sho-Pir had made it with his own hands after he and Baktior had built the first house in Siatang resembling the houses of Europe. To be sure half of the house, the half in which Gulriz lived, in no way differed from the other houses of Siatang. That had been the wish of the old woman, and Sho-Pir had respected it. And when Sho-Pir had wished to make a second bed for Gulriz, she had announced that the devs would be sure to fidget under the bed at night. Therefore Baktior made her the usual bunk of flat stones, filling the cracks with clay and placing boards over the top.

Out in the yard Baktior built himself a shelter elevated on poles, where he could sleep while the weather was warm, out of reach of the mosquitoes.

5

When the large round moon rolled up over the mountains and slowly floated away in the thin air above the canyon, a pale green light flooded the restless river, the silent cliffs, the walls of the ruined fortress, the single tower thrusting above the steep riverbank.

Among all the motionless shadows of the night, one shadow alone was animate. This was the shadow of Bobo-Kalon, working silently and steadfastly near the fortress wall. He would lift the rocks of the ruined tower and carry them, bending under their weight, to his new quarters, where he would place them neatly one on top of the other, building a new wall to separate his residence from the territory designated for the new canal.

Bobo-Kalon was without a robe, naked to the waist, wearing only a pair of pants tied with a piece of tape about his hollow stomach. As he worked, the light of the moon illuminated now his breast, half-covered with a long white beard and lined with rib-shadows, now his thin back knotted with muscles. No one must see him at work. Let them imagine on the morrow that the devs had been so anxious to isolate him from the rest of the world that they had built this wall. Let

them imagine whatever they pleased on the morrow! The new wall would extend from the mill, cross the ditch through which the water flowed, and join the old wall of the fortress. Let it be known to all who came to the mill that they came not to common ground, but to the very home of Bobo-Kalon!

It was difficult to carry the stones in the darkness. Thanks to the rising of the moon it was now no longer necessary to feel for suitable stones with his dry fingers. Oh no, Bobo-Kalon was not yet tired. There was still much strength in his bony shoulders, though according to the law of Ali he should not have expended this strength on physical labour.

The wall was already half built.

As he put one more stone in place, Bobo-Kalon suddenly started and straightened up, listening intently. He seemed to have heard a shuffling sound. Could someone be coming here? The sound continued. Whoever had entered the fortress made no effort to preserve the silence, scattering stones under his feet without the slightest restraint. What could be bringing anyone here this time of night?

Bobo-Kalon hastened to the tower in annoyance, taking his long white robe from the arched door where he had hung it, wrapping it around him and exchanging his hurried movements for a slow, leisurely manner. He turned to the moonlight, calmly gazing into the green dusk as though his profound thoughts had just been interrupted.

A fat, black-bearded man in a black turban and loose padded robe was crossing the courtyard toward Bobo-Kalon. The belt he was wearing glittered with copper trimmings. His stubby figure was made the more clumsy by the wide trousers fastened at his ankles. Bobo-Kalon immediately recognized Mirso-Hur, and looked at him in displeasure. He disliked the merchant, as he disliked all foreigners.

The merchant stopped before reaching Bobo-Kalon. Let the old man believe that Mirso-Hur had seen nothing! He looked at the ruined tower and at the remains of exploded rock; then, with the air of one overwhelmed by the extent of the disaster, he raised his short, fat arms to heaven.

"Oh worthy one!" exclaimed the merchant. "In what times are we living!"

The old man gazed at him in silence. It was necessary to

be polite and gracious to the merchant, since the latter did everything to win Bobo-Kalon's favour.

Mirso-Hur went up to Bobo-Kalon, took his hand and bent over to kiss the tips of his fingers. This was an old Siatang custom, but Mirso-Hur had not been born in Siatang. Bobo-Kalon resisted the obvious fawning of the merchant to which he replied by bending stiffly over the latter's hand and barely touching it with lips hard-pressed in pride. Mirso-Hur pretended not to take offence, good-naturedly squinting his little eyes half hidden by the bags puffing beneath them. But in his heart he thought maliciously that the reign of the Khans was over and it was high time for Bobo-Kalon to realize that in their mutual hatred for the present order which had come to this ancient land, they would do well to become friends.

"It is a warm night, praised be Ali!" said the merchant as he glanced at the wall built by Bobo-Kalon.

"Sit down," answered the old man, pointing with a careless gesture to a flat stone substituting for a bench.

As they sat there next to each other, Bobo-Kalon anticipated the merchant's question by saying:

"All the good people have not yet disappeared from off the face of the earth! And the hearts of even those who have abandoned me retain a bit of warm blood. See? They came in the darkness and built this wall."

"For money, respected one?" asked Mirso-Hur with biting graciousness.

"No. Only out of respect for me. I did not notice them in the darkness. Only now, when the moon came out . . . I myself readjusted a few of the top stones."

"Ah yes, worthy one! How your realm has decreased!"

"My realm consists of the benevolence of the Protector! Who can decrease that?"

"How true, Bobo! Who can decrease the domain of the Preordained!"

Mirso-Hur fell into a respectful silence. Bobo-Kalon was also silent. To call him "Bobo" was a familiarity indicating the merchant's lack of respect for his caste. But it did not pay to take offence, once he was head over heels in debt to Mirso-Hur! How subtly the merchant got people into his clutches! And now the time would never come when Bobo-Kalon could free himself. But what interest could the merchant have

in regularly supplying an impoverished old man gratis with meat and salt and imported green tea—with all those things which he should long ago have learned to do without? Of late the merchant came often and sat for hours at a time listening to him respectfully, as though his only interest were in hearing the words of the Guardian of Wisdom and the Interpreter of the Preordained.

"How are your affairs, Mirso-Hur?" asked Bobo-Kalon, breaking the silence at last.

"What affairs, Bobo?" replied the merchant, trying to adopt a manner as lofty as that of the old man. "Good affairs are all carried on up there," and the merchant pointed to heaven. "Whatever affairs we have down here are as cold as the snows of those peaks. Who ever comes to my shop? Who ever pays me his debts? They come only to sneak away opium, everyone hiding it from everyone else. Would you like some opium, Bobo? I have brought some with me."

"No, Mirso-Hur. How many times have you offered it to me! The illusion of a second life is required only by those who themselves will never know a second life."

"You are right, Bobo. Your soul will be incarnated in a panther, that you may devour those who hate you. In the other world things do not change as they do here. There is none of this unrest there."

Bobo-Kalon realized that for the sake of politeness or some other reason the merchant wanted to continue the extensive conversation begun when last they had met. That was foolish. The mind of the merchant was incapable of penetrating the great spaces of the Preordained. It was beneath the dignity of Bobo-Kalon to enter into intimate discussions with Mirso-Hur. But who else in the settlement was willing to listen to him so respectfully?

He said nothing. Neither did Mirso-Hur, confident that the old man could not resist speaking eventually.

The mill-stream flowed with a soft murmur. As the moon rose in the sky, the shadows shortened.

"I heard that today Baktior dared to raise his voice to you," said Mirso-Hur in a respectful tone, lowering his eyes to conceal their sly glint.

Bobo-Kalon chewed his dry lips without answering. "He is but the tail of a dog!" continued Mirso-Hur. "I can-

not understand, Bobo, how true believers could have allowed the dog to grow wolf fangs!"

"You live here. You should know."

"I know. But after all, he was one of your own people, born among these very rocks, and one of the most despicable of faqirs!"

"The most worthless of them, the most beggarly!" burst out Bobo-Kalon, at last participating in the conversation. "He never owned a house or a sheep or even a shirt to his back, as you well know!"

"And he would not have them even now if it were not for that Russian!"

"If it were not for that Russian, he would never have gone mad! A hundred devs have taken possession of him, from his head to his heels; a hundred vixenish devs have built their nest in his heart; they peer out of his eyes, fly off his tongue, and move his arms. They have devoured his soul. He lives without a soul and his body is accursed. Do you remember the gathering of the profane?"

"Indeed I do, Bobo. It took place in my time."

"I marvel that my liver did not burst at that time!"

"He got up and said with a grin: 'Your end has come, sayids and mirs! It is time for you to leave for Yakhbar!' And to our eternal shame the sayids and mirs left. Could they not have remained as I did, forgetting their former wealth, thinking only of eternal truths? They call him Chairman of the Village Soviet—it is enough to break your tongue to pronounce it—but he is not a human being. He is merely a repository of devs. Could the light of truth be darkened by devs in a soul devoted to the Sole Protector?"

"Nevertheless, Bobo, you must admit that now he is strong."

"Now? But three years ago, when that Russian came here, Baktior was one of my people. True, he was a faqir, but still he was from Siatang. Then he did not complain of his poverty. He had no desire to be well fed. He lived like the stones on the riverbank, knowing that there are big stones, and little stones, and that there are grains of sand. But like all the rest of us, he was then the repository of God—an insignificant, unnoticeable repository, but a repository nonetheless. And after his death his soul might have entered a small, innocent insect

dwelling under the wing of the smallest of sparrows. But three springs ago, when the hated Sho-Pir came here (may his father's ashes be scattered)—do you remember [that day? Do you remember it?"

"I remember everything!"

"On that day we gathered here at this mill above this very river, here in the courtyard of my fortress—after all, it is my fortress whatever anyone may say!—and we listened to that Russian. Ah, Holy Protector! Sitting here on these rocks with our hands crossed on our knees we listened to the impious words which he uttered. My blood boils at the very memory of those words! We listened and nodded our heads as we always do when we do not deign to argue with those who are beneath us—'Yes, yes, and a thousand times yes.' Baktior also listened, and I thought to myself, 'The stranger will go away and we shall spit on his tracks while he dreams that we have been convinced by his words!' My wisdom becomes clouded like soup in a pot when I remember how my ears were then stung by words which now have become our daily portion. And from whom do I hear them now? From my neighbours. From my own people. Not only the faqirs, but even the sons of akobirs repeat them! It is as hard for me to speak of this as though there were thorns in my throat. But I have lived five cycles and know all the truths of the Preordained. Now I wish only for peace. I am not interested in other people's affairs. And I am not interested in foreigners."

Bobo-Kalon broke off suddenly as though catching himself up. The merchant was sitting with his back to the moonlight, his face lowered in shadow. Perhaps he should not have begun this conversation about Baktior.

Mirso-Hur had caught the old man's insinuation and did not wish to hide the fact that he was offended.

"Bobo-Kalon, do you consider Yakhbarians also foreigners?"

Bobo-Kalon had no desire to speak about Yakhbar. It was sheer impudence to put the question so bluntly. Bobo-Kalon was annoyed with himself for having cast his wisdom before a Yakhbarian."

"When you came here eight years ago you were a foreigner. I remember when you came here to set up your shop. I myself read the paper given to you by Aziz-khon. It said: 'A worthy man, distinguished for his honesty and reverence for God.'"

"That was eight years ago. What would you say now?"

"I see that you esteem god."

Had Mirso-Hur not been a merchant, it is doubtful that he could have endured the insult. But he only bit his lip. The fact was that he had not yet had a chance to speak of the matter which had brought him to the old man. So he pretended to find nothing but flattery in the words of Bobo-Kalon, and said without raising his eyes:

"There can be no life without reverence for god. That is why everything here is collapsing, Bobo. And there is still much evil in store. Tell me, have you heard of the Russian caravan?"

"They were speaking about it here with Sho-Pir."

"What did they say?"

"That the caravan was coming."

"When?"

"At any time now. They are counting the days."

"Did they say what it would bring?"

"Flour."

"And what else?"

"I do not know."

"You do not know, but I do. It will bring books to teach the children the laws of the infidels. It will bring clothes which it is a disgrace to wear. It will bring stinking waters to pour into the throats of those who are ill. Ah, Bobo-Kalon, your people are lost! They will eat Russian sugar, they will eat Russian salt, the women will turn their backs on the men and the men will lose their minds."

"And they will stop buying your wares, merchant!" was Bobo-Kalon's biting rejoinder.

"My wares? Do you think it is of them I am thinking, even though I be a merchant? Do you think it will be to your advantage to have that caravan arrive? Do you think it will benefit your people? Will you refuse to speak to those who are yet willing to listen to you? Will your wisdom flow into their ears like empty water? Or do you think that all of your people have already ceased believing in the Preordained? You are silent, Bobo, when the wisdom of your words could burn like fire!"

"It seems that you would teach me what I should do, merchant," said Bobo-Kalon coldly. Realizing that the old

man had read his thoughts only too well, the merchant resolved to put his question bluntly.

"Forgive me, worthy one. It was not my mind which spoke, but my fuming heart. And now tell me, have you seen her who came here so mysteriously? I have not."

"Yes I have. She is very young."

"Of your people?"

"She did not say. And I could not tell. Her face is like that of our people."

"I heard that her clothes were not such as we wear."

"Her clothes were all torn, but they had been rich ones. They were Yakhbarian clothes. Our women do not braid their hair as hers was braided either."

"Do you think she came from Yakhbar?"

"Who can say? Possibly. I think she did."

"What else do you think about her, Bobo? Do you think she could have run away from her husband?"

"I do not know who she is. I only know it is a bad thing when a woman roams about in these mountains alone and does whatever she wishes without a man over her. Such are the times we live in. One crazy woman infects others with her craziness. It would be better if she had not come here. It would be better if our women did not see her and take example from her. But what is she to you, merchant?"

"Oh, nothing, nothing at all, Bobo!" muttered Mirso-Hur quickly. "I had no particular purpose in asking—only curiosity. But see, the moon is already sinking behind the mountains. Thank you for your wise words; it is time for me to be going. Interesting conversation hides the passage of time like a wall. Will you allow me to come to you again when loneliness drives me from the house? My soul finds rest in your company!"

Without waiting for the answer of the old man, who only bowed his head in gracious condescension, the merchant rose hurriedly and uttered the required formalities of parting. And although the moon was still far from reaching the edge of the gorge, Bobo-Kalon made no effort to detain his uninvited guest.

With his usual clumsy, heavy walk, the merchant emerged through the ruined gate of the fortress onto the path descending to the settlement between moon-bright rocky mountains.

The settlement was quiet and empty, for all the inhabitants had long since gone to sleep. Even the dogs were too lazy to bark at the lonely passer-by whom they perhaps recognized and therefore only followed with their eyes.

Mirso-Hur passed through the length of the village until he came to his shop perched on the very edge of a precipice over the river. Quietly opening the low double doors with their carved ornamentation, he stopped on the threshold and listened to the snoring which came from a dark corner of the room piled high with wares.

"Kendiry! Eh, Kendiry!" called the merchant softly.

The snoring stopped abruptly.

"Kendiry," repeated the merchant. "Get up. I want to talk to you!"

"What has happened?" asked a sleepy voice.

Mirso-Hur sat down on the doorstep, where he was joined by a half-naked individual holding up his pants with one hand. The moon lighted up the latter's clean-shaven face which was as sharp and thin as a scimitar. The skin was tight drawn over small, dry features. His large protruding teeth glistened in an expressionless grin, as though he had once made a malicious grimace which had permanently frozen into this forced smile. His head was also clean-shaven and shone in the moonlight.

When he reached the doorstep he crouched silently on his haunches in a pose which is as easy and comfortable for a nomad as sitting in an armchair is for a European.

In a half-whisper Mirso-Hur told him of his visit to Bobe-Kalon. Kendiry was merely a barber whom the merchant permitted to live in his shop in exchange for the help he offered. One might suppose that this ragged, beggarly barber, living on the merchant's charity, would have been humble and deferential in his presence. Two years before, when Kendiry had arrived in the village hungry and dirty, with nothing but a bag over his shoulder containing a homemade

razor and a whetstone wrapped in a rag, no one had wished to offer him shelter. At that time Mirso-Hur had given him a good meal, a place to sleep and even a robe and a turban from his stores. At first everyone had been amazed by Mirso-Hur's generosity, but when Kendiry continued to live with him for a month, then for two, and finally to remain with him entirely, the canyon-men decided that the merchant simply needed cheap labour, and that Mirso-Hur would not be a true merchant if he did not squeeze a hundredfold profit from the money he expended on the newcomer. Kendiry began to shave the beards and heads of the canyon-men without ever fixing a price, always being satisfied with whatever was given him, whether it were a tubeteikaful of wheat or a handful of dried mulberries. No one in the village knew where Kendiry had come from and among what people he had been born. He did not resemble a Yakhbarian or a Chinaman or a Persian or a Mongol. It seemed most likely that he came from one of the tribes of North India, but it was possible that he came from further away.

Wherever he came from, the canyon-men soon got used to him. He did not meddle in their affairs, and only on rare occasions substituted for Mirso-Hur behind the counter, principally when the merchant went to Yakhbar for goods. The year before the merchant had made him a present of a gun, probably as a reward for good work. The gun was a fine one which had been imported from Yakhbar, and from that time on Kendiry went in for hunting, disappearing in the mountains for days at a time and always bringing back with him a goat and some foxes or other game. Everyone knew that the pelts and the meat went to the merchant, and for that reason the cost of the gun was justified. When he spoke with the canyon-men, Kendiry never talked about himself, excepting to relate with sharp humour and inevitable cynicism the stories of his love affairs in various places throughout the mountains of Asia.

Now Kendiry was squatting against the carved door ready to listen to his benefactor. The merchant first spoke of the caravan which was expected to come to Siatang, but both of them had known about this for some time. When the merchant spoke about Nisso, Kendiry interrupted him.

"Oh Mirso-Hur! Of what concern to us is this girl?"

"Wait, Kendiry," objected the merchant. "She is not an ordinary girl. I have the idea that she may bring great profit to us." Thrusting his beard into the face of Kendiry, he said impulsively. "She is wearing Yakhbarian clothes!"

"What of it?" answered Kendiry, failing to understand the designs of the merchant. "Perhaps you would like to make her your wife. Perhaps she is very beautiful. But I am more interested in hearing whether you gave the tea to the old man."

The merchant ignored these last words and added quickly, "The old man said that she was wearing rich clothes. Maybe she lost her companions in the mountains. But I cannot imagine why anyone should be wandering through our mountains. I think she may have run away from her father or her husband in Yakhbar, in which case they must be looking for her. They will pay well to get her back, do you understand? If we could only find out who is looking for her so that we could take her back!"

"Nonsense!" said Kendiry with cold irritation. "As though there were not more profitable business than that! If Baktior and Sho-Pir had not taken her in we might have done something, but under the circumstances it would raise too great a stir; the money would stick in your throat."

The merchant dropped his head in thought. He himself realized that it would be no simple matter to take the girl back to Yakhbar. Perhaps Kendiry was right, but the Yakhbarian to whom she belonged would realize that the greater the trouble, the greater the compensation required.

"Forget it," interrupted Kendiry decisively. "I asked you whether you had given him the tea."

The merchant avoided Kendiry's eyes as he answered with ill-disguised discomfiture:

"I was going too. . . ."

"I asked you whether you gave it to him or not!"

"I offered him something else."

"What?"

"He did not take it. I am not to blame if he did not want to take it. I offered him opium."

"Again? Because he never smokes it?"

Mirso-Hur had long wished to tell Kendiry of the misgivings he suffered from having to supply all Bobo-Kalon's needs gratis. Kendiry had insisted on this a long time ago,

but how could a merchant conduct his affairs on such a false and shaky basis? To be sure Kendiry was sly. Kendiry had already given him much good advice, but in this case. . . . Perhaps it would bring him profit some time or other, but not for the present.

"I cannot continue!" cried the merchant in indignation. "I cannot, Kendiry! What will become of me? Giving things away all the time! Just imagine! During the summer I gave him flour once and then a second time, is that not so? I gave him tea once, then another time, and still a third time, is that not so? I gave him salt besides, and seven tubeteikafuls of peas." Mirso-Hur wrung his hands. "Three times I gave him some of the meat that you brought, besides two bars of imported soap. Why should he have soap? Let the old man wash himself with sand! The days of the Khans are over! Here it is all written down! I can show it to you if you like!"

The merchant was about to get up and bring his accounts from the shop, but Kendiry calmly stopped him with a movement of his hand. Mirso-Hur continued with more agitation than ever. "All right, you know everything without seeing the accounts. I keep on giving and giving without end, and the old man takes everything as if he was a Khan, without so much as noticing me. I see the contempt on his lips. As if I was not a merchant, but a miserable faqir paying him his due. And you sit there smirking at me. I know what you are thinking. That I am greedy. That I am a miser. But how is a merchant to take his profit? Who will pay me?"

"Tell me, Mirso-Hur," said Kendiry slowly and thoughtfully, as though he had not heard this impassioned speech. "Is the girl spending the night at Baktior's?"

Mirso-Hur immediately stopped short and his thoughts took another direction.

"The girl? Apparently you too think that this matter could bring me a pretty sum. Yes, she is at Baktior's. My man saw Sho-Pir carry her into the house."

"Maybe you are right, Mirso," continued Kendiry in the same thoughtful tone. "It is necessary to find out from whom she ran away."

"You think so too?" asked the merchant, immediately all interest. "Are you thinking of taking measures yourself?"

Kendiry gave the merchant a brief, cold glance, and then studied the moon as though estimating the time remaining before dawn. As he got up he said authoritatively:

"Go to bed! Do not lock the door until I come back."

He vanished in the darkness of the shop, and when he emerged he was wearing a grey robe and tubeteika. Without paying the slightest attention to the merchant, he jumped down on the ground and walked lightly along the path.

With a heavy sigh the merchant went into the shop and closed the door.

Kendiry avoided the settlement by keeping to the foot of the hill, and in this way he likewise avoided the moonlight. Only when he began to climb the hill on which there was not a rock or a bush did he proceed openly, climbing higher and higher. He crossed the hill, and on seeing the shine of the stream flowing through Baktior's garden, he made straight for it. The moon had nearly reached the end of its course, and Kendiry hastened his steps. Silently crossing the rough stones in his bare feet, he approached the wall about the garden, where he stopped to look and listen. Then he climbed the wall and cautiously sneaked up to the house. Baktior was sleeping up in his shelter. Sho-Pir was wrapped in a blanket sound asleep on a felt mat under a tree. Kendiry circled around the sleeper and made his way to the house. The moon lighted a window in which there was no glass. Emerging from the shade of the trees, Kendiry crossed the illuminated stretch with the stealthiness of a cat and came up to the window.

In the moonlit room he saw a large bed on which Nisso was tossing in her sleep. Her right hand had slipped over the edge, her black hair was spread over the pillow, and her calm, white face seemed chiseled out of soft stone.

Kendiry had not expected her to be like this. With difficulty he withdrew his gaze from the sleeping girl in order to examine the room. He did not find what he was searching for. Then he carefully circled the house. Among other clothes on the empty porch he found the torn tunic and trousers which Baktior's mother had washed for Nisso. He cautiously took them off the woolen string serving as clothesline and stuffed them inside his robe. Jumping down into the orchard, he left without a glance behind.



CHAPTER FOUR

I

NISSO was lying on the soft bottom of the river, while warm waters rocked her body. Apparently the water was shallow, for she had no difficulty in breathing. The sun was shining. It was warm. It was light. Everything would have been perfect had it not been for the noise. But the noise continued—much noise, loud noise, while all around lay shiny black stones. But the stones were motionless, so they could not be making that noise. Nor could it be the wind, for there was no wind. Probably it was Ashtar-i-Kalon lunging from side to side, but where was the Dragon? Why could Nisso not see it? Noise. . . . Noise. . . . Nisso glanced quickly about her in alarm. Now there was no sun and no light. But it was warm. And the noise continued. A huge man came out from behind a rock. He was black and extraordinarily fat. He was terrifying. Great flabby ears hung down over his puffy blue cheeks. His bald head was mottled and covered with lumps. A black hole served for a nose, his chin was cleft like a hoof, and stiff bristles grew out of his neck. And still Nisso recognized him. He was Aziz-khon. He came waddling toward her, paralyzing Nisso with fright. She wanted to run away, but the slimy river-bottom prevented her. Aziz-khon kept coming closer and closer. Aziz-khon spoke. His voice was very low, but it drowned out the noise.

“How can you run away? You are in the belly of the Dragon!”

Aziz-khon stretched out his fat blue hands. But suddenly the gentle Blue Horn interposed between his hands and Nisso. The cow looked at Nisso with pale blue eyes. How

strange! Why should the cow's eyes have become blue? It turned towards Aziz-khon in order to attack him, moeing plaintively the while.

"A-a-yo!" cried Nisso at last, and the cry woke her up.

She was in a cold sweat. Raising herself on her elbows in the soft bed, she looked about in alarm without being able to comprehend where she was.

There was nothing here to terrify her. It seemed to Nisso that she had not awakened, but had merely exchanged one dream for another. White walls shone on every hand. She had never before seen white walls. Beneath her was smooth ground of a kind she had also never seen before. It was made of wood, and as clean as a drinking bowl washed in hot water. In the wall was a square hole through which the sun shone and the leaves of a mulberry tree could be seen against a background of blue sky.

No, it was not a dream, and there was nothing to frighten her.

But the noise kept on and on and on. It was not a loud noise. It was very gentle. It was the sound of water close at hand.

Nisso glanced under the bed in search of the water. There was nothing but that wooden ground there. Who had ever heard of wooden ground before? Nisso felt the bed in which she was sleeping. How soft it was! How nice! The quilt had fallen on the floor, so she picked it up and felt it. What a clean quilt it was!

Surely nothing bad could happen here, otherwise everything would not be so clean and pleasant.

Nisso dropped her head back on the pillow and looked at the ceiling. It was not a black, stone, sooty ceiling, but a white one, as clean as the floor and without a smoke hole in it.

Nisso could understand nothing, but for some reason she felt calm. She closed her eyes and tried slowly and consistently to remember everything. She remembered eating the cheese with that crowd of people about her. The last thing she remembered was the strong man, different from all the others, who had at first held her tight so that she could not run away, and had then looked at her with laughing eyes. How bright and blue his eyes had been! She had never thought that people could have blue eyes.

The noise. Gentle and caressing. Where was that water flowing?

Nisso listened. It seemed that there was no one around. She carefully got out of bed. Her muscles still ached, but she was in a happy frame of mind. "I must have slept for a long time," she thought. Tiptoeing in her bare feet to the hole in the wall, she cautiously looked out. She saw a well cared-for orchard and lawn. Beyond the mulberry trees was a huge boulder, and beyond the boulder the grey rocky slopes of the mountains rose to the very heaven. The sky was blue and clear. A felt mat lay under one of the trees not far from Nisso, and somebody was sleeping on this mat. He was wrapped in a blanket and under his head was a green sack trimmed with handsome brown straps. He was sleeping. It must be that big man!

Nisso's curiosity led her to make an inspection of the room.

Above the bed hung a gun that was not at all like the gun of Pavlavon-Nazar. It was smooth and double-barrelled. It had no stand and Nisso thought it was very beautiful. Beneath the gun hung a brown leather bag and some shiny rods. Against the wall stood an unpainted wooden table. Nisso had never seen a table before. On it stood some earthenware cups, a metal teakettle, a wooden box containing tobacco, a wooden plate of apples, and some other little objects which Nisso did not recognize. Against the other wall stood some shelves with doors to them, like a little house. Nisso touched the doors to the cupboard, but quickly withdrew her hand when she heard them squeak. Some nails were driven into the wall, and they were not stone or wooden nails, but thin metal ones. Two long white cloths were hanging on these nails next to the door. Only now did Nisso notice the door.

Nisso thoughtfully turned away. How had she come to be once more among people? She had hidden and run away and been filled with a thousand fears, and now here she was. They had taken her and brought her here and soon they would ask her questions and put her to work. No doubt they would again treat her horribly. Perhaps that man sleeping out there wanted to take her for his wife. Why else should he have brought her into his house? And how did that all come about yesterday? For a long time she had stood behind the

tower and watched the people without letting herself be seen. Why had she not run away then? Ah, she remembered. She had been very hungry, and so tired that she did not realize what she was doing. And then? Then that man sleeping out there had laughed at her, but he had fed her just the same and had spoken to her in a low voice. Why had he fed her? And then brought her into his orchard? And doctored her arms and legs with mutton fat? What had been his purpose in doing all this? Of course he wanted to make her his wife. Or perhaps they all knew Aziz-khon and were afraid of him. The old man would come here and they would hand her over to him!

Nisso grew cold with fear. Her thoughts became confused, but with every fibre of her being she understood one thing: she must run away as quickly as possible. She must run away before that man out there should wake up!

Nisso rushed to the door, but suddenly she became conscious of the fact that she was naked. How could she run away naked? And besides, now it was daytime. She could not run away in the daytime.

Nisso stopped and listened, trying to figure out whether there was anyone on the other side of the door. Not a sound indicated the presence of anyone else in the house. Nisso calmed down and decided to make a plan. She must not simply dash off headlong. She must be sly, otherwise they would catch her and crowd around to stare at her again like yesterday.

From the other side of the door a woman's voice called out, "Eh! Are you awake?"

Nisso rushed for the bed, where she covered herself with the quilt and lay waiting.

The door opened and into the room came an erect, grey-haired old woman with an aquiline nose and a wrinkled face.

"Well, my black-haired beauty, what dreams did you have?"

Should she answer or not? Now it was clear that she could not think of running away. But the voice sounded more kind than angry.

Nisso glanced at the old woman out of the corner of her eye, in such a way that she could see her without the latter guessing it. The old woman was wearing a long white tunic

like all the other women, the only difference being that this tunic was not torn or dirty and was fastened at the collar.

"Aha! Pretending to be asleep! But I can see that you are awake! Did you have pleasant dreams?"

"Dreadful ones," whispered Nisso.

"But they are not dreadful now that you are awake, I hope."

Nisso resolved to say nothing. She would say nothing now or later. She would keep quiet all the time, like yesterday.

"Why are you silent? Are you afraid of me?" asked Gulriz quietly, and Nisso could see her eyes shining with laughter.

"I do not know what you are like," replied Nisso in spite of her decision.

"Oh!" laughed the old woman, and Nisso could see that in spite of all the wrinkles, her mouth was fresh and clean, with teeth as white as those of a young woman. "I am frightful indeed, with two hands and one head! I was planning to give you something to eat. Are you not hungry?"

"Who are you?" asked Nisso, throwing the quilt off her face.

"Me?" Jokingly the old woman gave her chin a thrust with her finger. "I am a proud one! I am the mother of Soviet power, no less!" Then, she added, wagging a finger at Nisso, "So you must be careful how you speak to me!"

"Are you the power then?"

"Not I. It is my son Baktior who represents Soviet power. This is the house of my son Baktior. He will do you no harm. Get up. You have been sleeping long enough. Call me *Naná*. * Have you a mother? Again no answer. All right, get up! It looks as though a dev had stolen your clothes and I washed them for nothing. I hung them on the line and when I went for them in the morning they were gone. I cannot understand what has happened to them, but it hardly pays to grieve over such rags. Get up and put on one of my tunics."

Nisso obediently threw off the quilt and let her feet down on the floor. The old woman seemed to be very kind.

"Do they hurt?" asked Gulriz sympathetically, glancing at the swollen cuts. "Can you walk?"

* *Naná*—Mother.

"They do not hurt much any more," said Nisso, and got up, embarrassed by her nakedness. "Tell me where the noise comes from, Naná. Where is the river?"

"The large river is below. The stream flows alongside the wall. It is thanks to Sho-Pir that we have such a comfortable house. He thought up how to build it so that it would not be hot in the summer."

"Who is Sho-Pir?"

"The one sleeping out there," said Gulriz, pointing through the window. "He brought you here yesterday."

"Is he your son?"

"My son is Baktior. He is also asleep up there in the shelter. Sho-Pir is Russian. I should like to have given birth to such a son."

Gulriz stepped outside the door for a second.

"Here, put on this tunic," she said as she returned, tossing the long homespun garment on the bed. "Dress yourself and we shall go have a wash before they wake up."

Reassured by her conversation with Gulriz, Nisso followed obediently. The old woman led her across the porch, where she took up a pitcher of hot water and continued to the spring located under a corner of the porch.

Nisso took off the tunic, which was so long that it tripped her, and prepared to wash. But the old woman ordered her to sit motionless while she herself washed the girl with hot water. Nisso submissively offered her back and arms and legs. "Who ever heard of wasting hot water like this?" she thought. "Aziz-khon was rich, but he would never allow them to burn firewood in order to wash with hot water. But it certainly is pleasant."

Gulriz asked no questions. Nisso said to herself that of course she would not answer the old woman if she did, but still it was strange that she should ask her nothing.

When Nisso was washed, Gulriz told her to get dressed.

"And now you must promise me to wash yourself like this every day, will you?"

"Yes I will, Naná," said Nisso softly with a smile.

Gulriz helped her pull on the tunic, which fell in folds about her feet. The old woman shortened it by winding a woolen girdle about her waist.

"When I have time, I shall take up the hem. For the present

you can wear it like that. Come into the house with me and sit there without running off anywhere. I shall go call Shopir. He asked me to as soon as you woke up."

Nisso went back on the porch, where she sat down on one of the steps and began braiding her wet hair. Now she did not braid it in many small braids as Aziz-khon had ordered her to, but in two thick braids as she had worn it during her childhood in Duob and as old Gulriz wore it.

"Russian?" thought Nisso. "I never saw a Russian before. He must be rich to have such a house—big and clean and made all of wood—even the floor is of wood. Russian! That is why he is so big. And apparently Russians have blue eyes. He is very strong. I wonder what he will do with me."

Once again she began to frown as the feeling of hostility and unrest returned. Throwing back her head challengingly, she looked in the direction of the orchard from which Shopir would come. Oh no! He would not be able to bribe her with endearing terms! She would not say a word, and if she could not run away right now, she would be sure to run away later!

Preparing herself for a bitter fight, Nisso waited tensely for the "Pir of Pirs." The very name of this man told Nisso that he was used to power and authority, that he would order her about and demand submission. How many people there had been at the tower yesterday, and he had given directions to all of them! But never mind, never mind—she would be as prickly as a porcupine!

2

He came toward her from off to one side—large and cheerful and so unexpected that Nisso started and dropped her eyes. He was wearing high boots and tightly belted breeches with a white shirt open at the neck. In his hands he carried a cake of soap, and he had thrown a towel over his shoulder. He came from around the corner of the house—not at all the direction from which Nisso had been watching for him. He stopped in front of the embarrassed girl, and after placing his soap and towel on the porch railing, said with a smile.

"Well, good morning, my pretty one. Do you object to even looking at me? What are you ashamed of? I see you

have washed yourself and look quite like a human being." Then, holding out his large hand quite simply, he repeated, "Good morning. What is your name?"

Sho-Pir's voice was pleasant and his tone friendly. Feeling that her anger was vanishing, yet too stubborn to give in, Nisso clenched the fingers on her knees more tightly and lowered her head still further so that Sho-Pir could not see her face.

"Ah, you little savage!" he laughed. "Come on, give me your hand. This is how we Russians greet each other," and taking Nisso's hand off her knee, he placed it in his spacious palm.

Nisso's fingers were soft and relaxed, and Sho-Pir added banteringly, "Squeeze tight! Tighter! That is how you must shake hands! You are a strong girl. You were brave enough to wander through these mountains all alone, and yet you are afraid of me! Look at me!"

Placing his hand gently on the girl's wet hair, he turned her agitated face so that he could see it. Nisso smiled in spite of herself as she was thus forced to meet his genial glance.

"Good! You should have done that long ago. What did I tell you, Baktior? She is smiling already!"

Nisso turned and saw Baktior standing on the porch. He had not put on a robe, and was wearing a Yakhbarian vest on his tan and lean but well-developed body. His wide baggy trousers made of homespun were tied under the vest with woolen strings having red tassels at the ends. He was short and stocky, and would have conveyed the impression of being very masculine had it not been for the expression of naive curiosity in his keen black eyes. He looked at Nisso as though seeing her for the first time, and when she turned toward him, he was the first to lower his eyes. But then he said good-humouredly.

"She thinks her tongue is a spoon, and is afraid to spill a drop."

"She thinks nothing of the kind," laughed Sho-Pir. "She simply has not yet discovered what kind of people we are. But that is nothing! Soon she will stop being afraid of us. Well, little mouse, have you a name?"

"Yes I have," answered Nisso with a shade of courage.

"What is it?"

Nisso answered challengingly. "You want to know my name? I shall tell you. Nisso. And now let me ask you a question. Why have you brought me to this house? I am not afraid of you. I shall run away anyhow."

"So you want to run away?"

Once more Nisso frowned.

"Go ahead and run if you want to," continued Sho-Pir with an effort to be serious. "I suppose you have seen too little trouble in your life. Do you think we shall prevent you? Go ahead and run away!"

There seemed to be absolutely nothing to be afraid of about this Sho-Pir. He was not at all high and mighty; in no way did he resemble a lord. And somehow it was pleasant, even if a bit annoying, to have him laugh at her as he did.

"You would do better to get up and join us at the table, or Gulriz will become angry. It is time to eat," said Sho-Pir. Taking hold of Nisso as though it were the most natural thing in the world, he lifted her over the railing and led her to a large plane tree under which Gulriz was preparing breakfast.

Nisso's head reached only Sho-Pir's breast, but in spite of his size there was nothing rough or importunate in the touch of his hand. Now Nisso no longer resisted the feeling of confident submission which she was experiencing for the first time in her life.

On the table stood a narrow-necked pitcher of milk, a wooden plate on which was some goat's cheese and another containing dried apricots and mulberries. Gulriz was wiping the earthenware drinking-bowls with a rag.

"I watched you bringing her here, Sho-Pir, and thought to myself: there was a time when I had not even a house or an orchard, while now I have not only a house and an orchard but a cow and even a daughter. I have everything now!"

"Oh no, not everything yet!" said Sho-Pir coming up to the table. "You have no bread yet. When do you plan to go up to your farm, Baktior?"

"Soon now—as soon as we finish the canal. Thank goodness this is the last year I shall have to go up to that accursed farm!"

"You certainly chose a fine place for it! I marvel that you have not yet broken your neck. But do not worry, Bak-

tion. You will have good farmland once we irrigate those barren fields. As for having a daughter, Gulriz—you better ask her if she wishes to be your daughter. She threatens to run away, is that right, Nisso?"

Nisso was looking so greedily at the food that she seemed not to have heard the conversation.

"Here, Nisso," said Sho-Pir, pushing her gently as he sat down at the table. "This is called a bench in Russian—you have nothing like this in your country, so you have no word for it. You have squatted on your heels long enough. Now you shall sit at a table, like me. Choose a place for yourself."

Sho-Pir nudged her toward the bench and Nisso sat down shyly on the edge, immediately pulling her legs up under her. Gulriz laughed.

"She does not yet know how! I too sat down that way the first time Sho-Pir led me to the bench. He laughed, but I was angry. Put your feet down! Put them all the way down to the ground!"

Nisso obeyed the old woman, and was ashamed of her movements. When Sho-Pir himself poured milk into her bowl, she was completely overwhelmed. Was it worthy of a man to be serving her? And who ever heard of men eating together with women? What authority could the men have if they behaved in such a way? Why had he said all that about her being a daughter? Could it mean that they did not intend to hand her over to Aziz-khon? But they did not yet know where she had come from. She must be careful not to give herself away. She must say nothing.

At the same time everything around her roused her curiosity. She wanted to talk and ask questions, but first let them ask her. She would not answer, and then—? She herself could not guess what would happen then. Overcoming her embarrassment, Nisso began to eat, at first shyly, then more boldly as hunger and greed got the upper hand.

The others began to speak about their affairs and seemed to have quite forgotten Nisso. Glancing out of the corner of her eye to make sure that no one was looking, Nisso slipped a piece of cheese below the table, catching it between her knees. The future was as yet uncertain. Maybe she would have to run away and then she would need food. She must

store up as much as possible. But she blushed and lowered her eyes when Sho-Pir stretched out his hand for the hidden cheese and placed it back on the table.

"Are your knees more hungry than your mouth, Nisso?"

Everybody laughed. Nisso shrank to one side, but Sho-Pir patted her on the head.

"Eat as much as you like, Nisso! We shall always have enough food for you. If you are hungry, tell Gulriz."

Then, turning away, he again began talking to Baktior about the canal and about some land which had to be divided among people whose names he mentioned. Nisso was grateful to him for not looking at her flaming face. Suppressing her greed, she began to watch the others, so that she might eat as they did, and no more than they did.

Gulriz went into the house and brought a bowl of pea porridge which they all began to eat with wooden spoons. Baktior spoke of the famine which threatened the settlement, and Nisso wondered how they could speak of famine when there was so much to eat on the table. To be sure, Aziz-khon always had more, but in the first place, no one there ever spoke of famine, and in the second, Aziz-khon always ate everything up himself. If he had meat, he left the women only the gnawed bones, and if he was generous with his bread it was because, as Nisso knew, all the population had to bring him a portion of their harvest.

Nisso's black eyes ran from object to object. She watched Sho-Pir's every movement, but paid almost no attention to Baktior and Gulriz. Her eyes followed each spoonful of porridge that he lifted to his mouth.

Sho-Pir questioned Baktior at length about the expected harvest of mulberries, and then turned to Nisso, asking in an offhand manner.

"Will there be a good harvest this year in the place you came from?"

"Probably a bad one," answered Nisso simply. "I do not know. It is a tiny settlement."

"What is it called?"

"Duob," answered Nisso before she had time to grasp the true purpose of the question.

"So you are from Duob? That is the third gorge from here. Four days' journey. I know that settlement, although

I have never been there. It is a wild place. Why did you leave?"

"Just because," said Nisso, dropping her eyes.

"Have you a father and mother there?"

"No."

"Did you come here directly from Duob?"

"No," answered Nisso in a scarcely audible voice.

Sho-Pir glanced significantly at Baktior, who nodded his head in understanding.

"Do you want to return to Duob?"

"No!" said Nisso emphatically as she studied the pea held between her trembling fingers.

"Or to the place you just came from?"

"Oh no, no!"

"A bad place?"

"Very bad!" whispered Nisso.

"Well, Baktior," said Sho-Pir, turning sharply away from Nisso. "Is no one intending to mow the clover along the canal?"

Baktior answered something or other, but Nisso did not listen. Once more she was filled with gratitude to Sho-Pir for refraining from asking any more questions. As soon as he had finished his porridge, he placed his spoon on the table and got up, saying to Baktior:

"Let us go to the canal now. We must finish our work. You remain here, Nisso. Do not go anywhere. I say that for your own good. Go to sleep if you wish, or into the orchard. Gulriz, give her a good meal later on. Come on, Baktior!"

3

When Nisso came out of her trance she was amazed to find that no one was watching her, that indeed no one was anywhere around. She got up and strolled about the garden. The old woman was apparently so engrossed in her household chores that she did not pay her the slightest attention. Nisso circled the orchard and came to the wall on the opposite side. No, the old woman did not call or come after her. Nisso realized that if she wished to run away, no one would stop her. There was the hill, and the foot of the mountains. It was utterly quiet, without a soul in sight. She could go wher-

ever she wished. She stood in front of the wall trying to figure out how she might best take advantage of her freedom. And suddenly she realized that she did not wish to run away anywhere.

Slowly she walked along the wall surrounding the garden until she came in sight of the house again. She crawled up on a large rock above the stream. The boughs of a mulberry tree screened her from view, and she lay down on the warm rock to watch the house through the boughs.

It was a strange house—white, with a porch built over the stream supported by thin poles driven into the water. From where she was she could not see what was going on on the porch, for it faced the settlement far below on the other side of the house in the narrow, semicircular valley. To the right and left the valley was enclosed by massive cliffs, at the foot of which curved the wide river.

There must be fifty houses in the settlement. There must be a hundred. Nisso could not count to one hundred. Probably she could not count even to fifty. She studied the strange settlement where the houses were the same as those in her native village of Duob. The people were also the same, in their rawhide shoes and homespun robes. In the yards were goats, chickens, sheep and donkeys. The walls were made of stone, and apricots were being dried on the flat roofs. Everything was the same as in Duob, except that there was more of everything here, and the location was more beautiful: the valley was wider, the river broader and deeper, the orchards greener and richer, and there were many people and houses and animals. On a cliff to the right, at the very edge of the water, stood the tower of the fortress, rising like a fat black finger. How terrifying it had been yesterday, when the second tower had collapsed in a roar of fire and smoke! Nisso guessed that this had been the work of Sho-Pir. He was a man of authority, whom everyone obeyed. But there was nothing frightening about him—nothing at all! He spoke Nisso's tongue, like every one else here, but he pronounced the words differently, as though they did not belong to him. Of course they did not belong to him. He was a Russian. He was dressed in clothes that no normal person wore. Who had ever heard of going about in such boots and breeches! Nisso had wanted to touch his clothes

when he was talking with her in the morning. She would have touched them if she had not been afraid of him. "Are you afraid of me?" he had asked her, laughing. There was no air of importance about him. Aziz-khon never laughed, and no one in his house ever laughed. And if by chance he happened to laugh, it was always in the manner of Zogar. It was a malicious laugh which irritated Nisso. But Sho-Pir laughed joyfully, as though there was nothing dreadful in the world at all. And Gulriz laughed and Baktior laughed. They were a foolish kind of people, laughing all the time without knowing why. Especially Sho-Pir. He would look at her and say something foolish and this made her uncomfortable. How could she look such a person in the eye? Nisso had never before come in contact with such people.

Perhaps she should run away after all. But she did not want to. For the first time in her life people had been kind to her and demanded nothing of her. It must be some kind of a snare. She dared not believe their sincerity. Probably it would be better to run away. Nisso did not stop to consider where she could go. She only listened to the voice of fear which would be silent for a time, and then would cry out with such force that her very knees ached. If she should run away, the old lady no doubt would run after her. There she was busying herself about the yard, glancing occasionally in Nisso's direction. But she was only an old woman! She could never catch Nisso! She could go now, while Sho-Pir and Baktior were away—straight along the stream to that bare mountain. Let Gulriz shout her lungs out. Nisso could run faster than her old voice could travel.

Nisso sat on the rock with her legs drawn under her considering whether she should run away or not. She really had no desire to. She was warm and calm and comfortable, with the soft breeze sapping her strength. And Gulriz did not demand any work of her. Who had ever heard of an old woman doing all the work while a young one sat on a rock hugging her knees and doing nothing? There was Gulriz breaking up dry brush and carrying it into the house. There she was coming out of the house and setting to work slicing apples, probably to dry them. Now she had finished slicing them and was climbing up the ladder to the roof to spread them in the sun. Then she climbed down, entered the stone

storehouse and emerged with a churn for butter and two crocks which probably contained milk. She had begun a new task. . . .

Nisso felt a bit ashamed to be sitting there doing nothing, but it was so nice on the rock! So warm! She felt a sudden desire to sleep, and she did not resist it. She stretched out face down on the rock, letting the sun warm the cuts that were now healing. She laid her head on her arms, saying to herself that of course she should run away, but instead she closed her eyes and turned her left cheek to the hot sun. She only drowsed, but drowsing takes tighter hold of a person than sleep. Or perhaps she actually slept, remaining conscious only of the cheerful rippling of the water among the rocks. The wind brushed her cheek in gentle gusts. The leaves rustled slightly, barely touching her. Somewhere in the measureless spaces of half-consciousness, she could hear human voices calling to each other down there below. She could hear the knocking of Gulriz' churn. And all these noises were quiet and sweet and soothing. If she could only remain lying here like this on and on, for a whole lifetime!

Never before had Nisso experienced such peace.

4

At that very hour of the morning when Gulriz entered the room where Nisso had slept, Kendiry was sitting on a rug in the locked shop in front of the yawning merchant. Between them lay the wet remnants of Nisso's clothes. Kendiry told of his night's visit to the home of Sho-Pir.

Through the cracks between the carved double doors came a ray of sunlight lighting up the shop which was piled high with goods. Here was everything the mountaineers might need: brightly painted ornaments for their saddles, iron pots, cans of paint marked with colourful labels, rouge for the women's faces, pink rock-salt, turbans, needles, curved knives, round mirrors, dried peas in jute bags, mysterious Tibetan narcotics for all illnesses, green chewing tobacco, and vari-coloured yarns, copper bracelets, earthenware dishes, narrow-necked pitchers, scented salves, beans and millet—everything that could be loaded on donkeys and brought from the bazaars and colonial shops of any provincial

town in the Orient. All these goods, apparently too dear for the inhabitants of Siatang, lay on the shelves year after year, growing ever more dusty and faded. And each time the merchant glanced at them he was reminded of his impending bankruptcy and of the good old times when he had done a lively business with the mirs and sayids. Now the inhabitants of Siatang came to him from time to time only for food and the opium which represented Mirso-Hur's main source of profit. His business was based on barter, and only in the fall did the back of his store become filled with the grain and flour which he exacted from the canyon-men at harvest time as payment for their debts. Late in the fall he took part of this grain and flour to Yakhbar, where he sold it for a good price, and brought back a new supply of opium and the things without which the canyon-men could not exist. He kept the rest of the grain in his shop until spring, so that he could lend it out at enormous interest when the time for sowing arrived. In the winter, when the snows cut off Siatang from the rest of the world and times were hard, the inhabitants came to the merchant for a bowl of wheat, a measure of peas or a few tubeteikafuls of dried mulberries. Formerly the merchant had never refused anyone, knowing that only death could enable his debtor to escape him. But now times had changed. Anything could happen now. And more and more often the humble and respectful canyon-men went away with empty hands after a genial but futile conversation with Mirso-Hur. For they had neither silver money nor fine clothes nor sound dishes which they could offer as guarantee of payment. Even the harvest, which they always promised, had ceased to be a sound basis for barter since the coming of Sho-Pir.

As he listened to Kendiry, Mirso-Hur fingered his stiff beard and frowned up at him from under coal-black brows.

"The only one I ever saw who approached her in beauty was a girl in Khorassan," said Kendiry. "That was in a former cycle of my life. At that time I was dressed like a Feringi and rode on horseback to Nishapur to visit the brother of the local khalifa. What a splendid journey it was! We stopped to spend the night in somebody's garden. A woman came out to bring me boiled eggs and sour milk, and when I looked at her I thought that even in the harem of the All-Powerful

Potentate there could not be a woman her equal! She thought I was a Feringi, and I said to her, 'Come with me and be my wife. My home is in Meshhed.' But she did not want to go. That night I seized her, bound her hand and foot, threw her over my horse and rode three stones' distance—"

At great length Kendiry related this particular story of his adventures, bragging inordinately of the woman's beauty.

"But this one is still better! Like a new moon! At the very height of her beauty!"

"Why did you not enter the house?"

Kendiry bared his teeth in a cold smile.

"Business before pleasure, Mirso-Hur! Does a good hunter shoot from afar? Do not worry, merchant, the time will yet come. Open the door so that we can examine her clothes."

Mirso-Hur pushed open the door and Nisso's clothes were flooded with sunlight. Placing the wet rags on his knees, the merchant began studying the design woven into the fabric.

"This is not from Yakhbar. It is from Garmite," he said. "Do you remember the merchant Muhibullo?"

Kendiry narrowed his eyes.

"The one who lives beyond the fourth pass? There by the lake?"

"He is the one. Or perhaps it was bought from Samandar-bek. But that design is from Garmite. It is woven only in three villages—Dilshurta, Nau-Badan and Vibist. Only the old women living in those villages know this design. It has been forgotten in other villages. Look at these red and yellow threads—do you recognize the flower? It is the Hasprokh, which sprang from the sweat of Allah. And what is that green flower cutting across it? Tell me that, Kendiry—what is it? You must admit that you know less than I do. I am the only one who knows this now. Ob-i-sebzi is the name of that flower. A rain of blood fell when the green banner of Islam entered the Purple Mountains. In this war the gallant warriors of the All-Powerful Potentate wiped out the impious fire worshippers. Praise be to Allah, all of them were destroyed, and old people say that wherever the green banner of Islam went, this green flower sprang up. It is this flower which is embroidered here. We must find out what Yakhbarian has visited those three villages of late. And then look here!"

The fat, clumsy merchant sat on the rug tracing the designs on Nisso's clothes with his pudgy, ring-laden fingers. He became so absorbed in the task that he analysed the entire design around the collar of the tunic. Then he tossed it carelessly on Kendiry's knees.

"Will you go?"

"Yes," answered Kendiry.

"First go to the ressaldar, then to Arbob-Hassim. Then you can go to Aziz-khon. The ears of these people are sharper. Maybe you can first discover who has lost a wife or a daughter. If you do not succeed in finding out from them, then go on to Garmite, and may your journey be blessed! If you find the owner, say: the price will be dear, but the girl can be returned."

"You explain to people here that I have gone for goods," said Kendiry absent-mindedly as he rolled Nisso's clothes into a bundle. Then he went out into the yard through the back door.

5

Mirso-Hur pushed away a large stone and threw open the doors of his shop. On the grass under a mulberry tree sat the ragged Karashir. And while his visitor was only Karashir, the poorest, the shabbiest of all the faqirs—Karashir who had not even a robe to his back, and whose tattered sheepskin scarcely held together—nevertheless Mirso-Hur narrowed his eyes with satisfaction. After all, Karashir was one of those who worked for Sho-Pir. Karashir supported the new government and obeyed Baktior's every word, openly violating the Preordained and jeering at the merchant. If Karashir were sitting here patient and humble, it could mean only that after a long inner struggle he had been brought here by the weakness of which Mirso-Hur was aware. Of course he had come to ask for opium, and he would receive it. But first it was necessary to have a little talk with him.

Mirso-Hur settled himself in the middle of the rug. Karashir said nothing. Maybe he hesitated to begin the conversation. What if he should suddenly get up and go away without speaking?

"Evidently you are sitting under my tree because you

have come to see me," said the merchant with intentional rudeness when his patience was exhausted.

"Yes, I have come to see you. I want to speak with you," said Karashir without getting up and without bowing.

"In other words, thanks to the Protector, you have come to wish me good health?"

"Yes, I wish you good health," answered Karashir. "Have you any flour?"

"Ah, it is flour he wants," thought the merchant with displeasure. "That is another question. In other words, he has received no flour from the Soviets. But he will not get it from me either!"

However, extensive experience had taught Mirso-Hur never to answer questions immediately. With a penetrating glance at the frowning Karashir he said:

"Why should we shout at each other across the grass? Come here, Karashir. This rug is for serious conversation."

Karashir came reluctantly into the shop. He took a seat on the rug and glanced at the merchant haughtily, as though it was Mirso-Hur who had come with a request rather than he. Neither of them said a word.

"Hm-m-m," said the merchant at last. "Now we can talk. Tell me why you want flour, Karashir."

"I have not yet gathered in my harvest. I have many children. Give me half a sack of flour, and when the grain is ripe I shall give you a whole sack in return."

"Too little. Give me three sacks," said the merchant roughly, with a sarcastic glance at Karashir.

Stung by this reply, Karashir said sharply, "Are you not being too good to yourself? Squeezing such profits out of us!"

"Everybody works for his own profit."

"But not everybody is dishonest!"

"Honesty is for little people. Big people have no need of it. Otherwise there would be no big people."

"There are big people who are honest as well," said Karashir glancing challengingly at Mirso-Hur.

"Who?" asked the merchant spitefully, for he already knew the answer. "Maybe you wish to name your Shopir?"

"Who can find a bad word to say about him?"

"Ha! He took another man's wife!"

"I know nothing about that," said Karashir, absent-mindedly stroking his bare knee.

The merchant was annoyed by Karashir's air of assurance. He had not anticipated a conversation of this sort.

"You know nothing, but everybody else knows everything. He makes you work, promising happiness in this world. But when you are hungry it is to me he sends you. 'Get it from the merchant!' Honesty!"

"That is not true!" protested Karashir hotly. "He did not send me to you!"

"Humph! You came of your own accord, I suppose. Against his will."

"Yes, against his will. I came in spite of him. The shame is mine, and not his. He calls you a swindler and tells us not to take from a swindler. And you are a swindler indeed! I am a fool for having come to you! I need nothing from you! I shall have nothing to do with you!"

Karashir got up impulsively, pulling the edges of his sheepskin around him so that the merchant got a whiff of its sour odour.

Mirso-Hur immediately realized that it was unwise to part bad friends with even so poor a debtor. Swiftly reaching up toward a shelf loaded with small objects, he grabbed a little bag and thrust it towards Karashir. The latter's face expressed struggle and confusion.

"No, I will not take it," he said in a hushed voice, jumping up off the doorstep and hurrying away from the house.

"Wait, Karashir!" called the merchant after him. "If you come to me later when your soul is hungering for a smoke, I will not give it to you. Take it now! Here!"

The bag fell with a thud at the feet of Karashir. He wished to proudly step over it, but he stopped and his ravenous eyes became glued to the bag. He slackened his pace, hesitated a moment, then quickly bent and thrust the opium inside his robe, holding it with his hand and frowning guiltily as he walked away without daring to glance back at the merchant who once more had emerged the victor. With a triumphant leer, Mirso-Hur watched him disappear, struggling to calm the anger which only now seethed within him.

Karashir's wife was waiting for him behind the large boulder where the path turned toward the village. The nickname of "Fish Bones" had been aptly given to this woman who though still young had already become sour and withered. The canyon-men had given her this nickname so long ago that they had forgotten her true name, and Fish Bones herself rarely recalled it. Her long yellow face was always sad and grim, and her dark, narrow eyes were always lowered, so that it seemed she never looked at the bright sky. As she sat on a stone waiting for Karashir, she was as motionless as though she herself had turned to stone. Her dishevelled black hair fell about her shoulders and her long greasy robe was carelessly unfastened. The fingers locked on her knees were covered with such dry and wrinkled skin that it seemed they could not be unclasped. Eight hungry, half-naked children waited at home for her, and she was convinced of the rightness of having forced Karashir to go to the merchant. It made no difference what would happen later, if only he gave them flour today! If he gave it to them, she would make cakes which even she would eat. She had not had bread in her mouth for a whole year, and she kept recalling the taste as she impatiently watched the rock from behind which Karashir would appear with the sack over his shoulders.

But when at last Karashir appeared and Fish Bones saw that there was no sack on his shoulders, her face became distorted with anger. Karashir advanced falteringly with the little bag of opium hidden in the pit of his arm: see, he had nothing in his hands—nothing at all—let her even open up his sheepskin if she wanted to. The merchant had refused to give him anything at all. That was their misfortune, their fate!

"Why did he refuse?" asked Fish Bones hoarsely, getting up. "What did he say?"

"He said that everything was over for such as me. Never mind. At least I threw a few sharp words in his face. Let him choke on them!"

Fish Bones said nothing. But her mouth had been watering for those cakes! Something must be wrong. Her husband was a fool, and of course was to blame.

"You do not know how to ask!" she cried. "You are too proud. You have learned to be proud from that Russian.

You believe everything he says, but a hungry man should forget his pride. Do you want your children to die? Get along home with you! I shall manage without you. You think only of yourself! We shall have flour yet!"

Karashir obediently went home, thinking all the while of the little bag pressed under his arm. He kept thinking that in defiance of all the world he would have a glimpse of a land where all were happy; he would live in that land and disport with women who were not at all like that vicious woman who was his wife.

In the meantime, Fish Bones almost ran past the trees on the riverbank in front of the merchant's shop and boldly crossed his doorstep.

The merchant met her with such a cold, contemptuous glance that all her courage immediately left her. She sank on the rug in front of him, crossing her bare feet.

"Humph! So now *you* have come!"

"Yes, I have come. My husband is a fool. He does not know how to ask. I shall ask differently, oh worthy one! Formerly you gave us flour. Give it to us now. Not much. As much as god bids you. I myself shall pay you for it."

"Could you pay me right now?" asked the merchant, looking at her brazenly.

"What have I to pay with now? Ah, Ali! You say—"

But Fish Bones' fright was immediately supplanted by cold submission.

"Just as you say, worthy one. It is up to you."

She thought of her children, and of the taste of fresh-baked bread. The merchant looked at her disdainfully and slowly got up. Going into the rear of the shop, he brought back two stale cakes made of dried peas and threw them at the woman's feet.

"Here, Fish Bones. We keep our gnawed bones for the dogs, but I am generous. You may go now. And you need not pay me for these excellent cakes!"

Trying to hide her humiliation by hanging her head so low that her hair covered her face, Fish Bones left the shop with uncertain steps. She clutched the cakes to her breast, but she was no longer thinking of food.

When she had disappeared behind a bend in the path,

Kendiry emerged from the back entrance of the shop and set out on his journey.

"Did you see her?" sniggered the merchant. "I am not so greedy, as you see!"

"I saw her," answered Kendiry indifferently, without so much as a smile. "Enough to spoil anybody's appetite. You have no cause to complain of poverty when you can give away things without asking anything in return."

"Of course! That beggarly fool need not think he can call me a swindler for nothing! I am never long in paying back my debts!"

6

That evening, after a day spent in idleness, Nisso went to a distant corner of the orchard and crawled under the mulberry trees to gather up the sweet berries. They were dark blue and very large; Nisso had never seen such large berries in her native Duob. There had been several trees of fine berries in the orchard of Aziz-khon, but Nisso had found them too sweet and spicy for her taste.

Nisso had lost her girdle, so that the long tunic belonging to Gulriz slipped down over her feet and got in her way. Gradually she filled her skirt with berries without understanding why and for whom she was gathering them.

She did not wish to leave the orchard. Here she felt safe and utterly content.

On hearing men's voices she hid behind the trees. But she was not afraid; she realized that all day she had in fact been waiting for the return of that kind and incomprehensible man. Now she could see him in between the trunks of the trees as he approached in the company of that other man whom they called Baktior. There was nothing exceptional about that other one, but the Russian—!

Without betraying her presence, Nisso listened to the calm voice of the Russian. He was not laughing now. He was speaking very firmly, like one in command. But the rustling of the leaves prevented Nisso from catching the words.

Should she go to the house? The girl wanted to have a better look at Sho-Pir, but she felt it was better to remain where she was.

Nisso sat down on the grass and began to pick over her berries, putting the largest and most luscious ones in her mouth. Suddenly someone called in a loud voice,

"Nisso! Eh-h-h, Nisso!"

With a start Nisso let go of her skirt, scattering the berries on the grass.

"Nisso! Come here! Where are you hiding?"

With a feeling that she must be obedient in this house, she got up and went to meet Sho-Pir. As soon as he saw her he burst into uncontrollable laughter. Hurt and perplexed, Nisso stood there smiling ruefully.

"You are wonderful, simply wonderful!" he managed to say at last, with his hands on his hips. "You should have a look at yourself! Upon my word, you are like a scarecrow!"

Only then did Nisso notice that her tunic was stained from top to bottom and that dirt was glued to her sticky hands.

She wanted to run away, but Sho-Pir held her.

"Come on, come on. Time to have dinner," and he pushed her bantering toward the house.

"Why on earth did you give her such a tunic, Naná? She looks like a chicken in a sack."

"I know nothing, nothing at all," answered Gulriz. "I have not laid my eyes on her all day. Turn around, Nisso. Where is your girdle? Lost it? How rich you must be! Here, tie yourself up with this string."

"Hurry up and wash yourself," said Sho-Pir, and Nisso obediently went to the stream.

Baktior brought a bowl filled with apricot khalva from the storehouse. Sho-Pir knew that Gulriz had made this khalva for the spring festival.

"Feeling spring in your heart, Baktior? Your sweetheart has smeared herself up like a little calf. I sent her for a wash."

Baktior blushed and covered the khalva with his hand, but it would be too obvious if he turned around and took it back to the storehouse.

"You must not joke like that, Sho-Pir. Someone may hear, and you know what gossip would spread then! The Chairman of the Village Soviet stealing somebody else's woman!"

"Woman! She has not yet had time to open her eyes on the world and you call her a woman! She is only a little girl."

"No, she is not a little girl," insisted Baktior. "She is a woman."

"I suspect you like her. Am I right?"

Baktior had difficulty in becoming used to Sho-Pir's teasing. He was about to take offence when Sho-Pir added:

"But why should you not marry her? Naturally, according to Soviet law. There is no reason why she should not like you. Are you twenty years old yet? Of course. Let her live here with us and she will grow to love you. What you lack in height you make up for by being cheerful and enthusiastic."

At this moment Gulriz brought a pot of pea porridge from the house.

"Go get the girl, Naná! Where can she be?"

"She is washing her tunic," said the old woman. "You gave her a great fright, Sho-Pir!"

"Give her something else to put on. She is a little goat to be sure!"

When at last Nisso appeared and took her place at the table, clean and fresh, with neatly braided hair, she announced that she had eaten her fill of mulberries. Sho-Pir did not insist on her eating, but he had her sit there with them during the meal.

He noticed with satisfaction that Nisso had become less wild, answering their questions modestly but willingly. Already she spoke naturally with Baktior, who always blushed at such times, a fact which surprised Sho-Pir, since he had always known Baktior as a bold and resolute young man.

It was this boldness and energy which had attracted Sho-Pir to Baktior from the very first days of his life in Siatang. It was because of these qualities he had done his best to have him elected Chairman of the Village Soviet. The canyon-men had elected Sho-Pir himself as Baktior's assistant.

At that time Baktior had been only seventeen years old. When he first came to Siatang, Sho-Pir (who at that time was not Sho-Pir at all but the demobilized Red Army man Alexander Medvedev) stopped in the first mulberry orchard where the water in the irrigation ditch seemed cleaner than usual and the shade of the trees denser. Slip-

ping his knapsack, gun, and field bag off his shoulders, he threw down his army coat and stretched out wearily on the grass.

The inhabitants of the village gathered about him, staring at the newcomer without hesitation and feeling his clothes and possessions with naive curiosity. A sharp argument rose among them. Particularly vehement was a young black-eyed canyon-man who almost came to blows with two old men insisting on their point of view in wrathful, authoritative tones. At that time Alexander did not understand the Siatang tongue, but later he found out that the old men had wanted to drive him away, and it was only the young faqirs who had defended him, claiming that he had come from "the real Soviet power."

Baktior was the leader of these young people. From that day on he and Sho-Pir had been good friends. Soon Alexander discovered that Soviet power was a mere fiction in Siatang, for it was in the hands of Safar-Ali-Izzet-bek, cousin of Bobo-Kalon, the richest, most eminent and fanatic of the sayids. He called himself "Chairman of the Revolutionary Committee, the Village Soviet and the Bolsheviks." It was hard to guess where he had even heard these words. Actually it would have been more correct to have called himself the Khan, for all of Siatang groaned under his power without daring even to dream of any change.

All the more bold then was Baktior's announcement that he intended to offer the hospitality of his home to this Russian.

The mulberry orchard by the stream where the home of Baktior now stood had belonged at that time to a mir who later emigrated to Yakhbar. Baktior and his mother had then lived in a miserable smoke-begrimed cave in one of the cliffs. After spending a few days in that cave, Alexander Medvedev decided to remain in Siatang.

This marked the end of his long wanderings through the High Mountains. What else was there for him to do? Return to his native town? Parents, wives, children awaited the other men, but no one was waiting for him. How could he bear returning to a place where everything had been destroyed? How could he return to that little whitewashed town standing in the middle of endless fields of fluffy cotton where in his childhood Alexander had stood watching the pale, mysterious

snow peaks fading like ghosts into the blue sky. No one knew the names of those peaks or how far away they were. The inhabitants of the town related the most fantastic stories about them. It seemed that the glacial heights were inhabited by a tribe of horrible, bearded dwarfs who lived in caves in the ice. These dwarfs had never seen grass or trees or ordinary human food. They ate only a particular blue stone which they obtained by flying from summit to summit on the wings of huge birds. Many inhabitants of the town swore that they had seen these birds. They even claimed that once during a severe storm one of them had fallen down on the main street, and from its broken wing had sprung a frightened dwarf who ran the length of the street only to hide among the cotton plants outside the town.

When Alexander grew up he realized that these had been only fairy tales, but the mystery of the mountains remained. And as he matured his desire to penetrate those forbidden heights became more insistent. To be sure, had that great calamity not overtaken him when he was already a grown man with a family, he probably never would have reached the mountains, but gone on driving his truck over the hot, dusty roads. However, life took an unexpected turn which enabled him to realize his childhood dream. For more than two years Alexander had fought the *basmachi*¹ in these mountains as a member of a Red Army detachment. When his detachment emerged from the deserted spaces of the Eastern Valleys, inhabited only by nomads, and entered the valley of the Great River, they came to a settlement resembling Siatang, where for the first time Alexander met these simple, remarkable mountaineers. It seemed to him that dwarfs should come out of the mountain caves like in the fairy tale and fly away on the wings of giant birds. Incidentally, Alexander saw many vultures flying above the Eastern Valleys of a size capable of having given rise to such tales.

Commissar Karavayev always insisted that Red Army men should make friends with the local population.

"It is our job to remain here and help these people learn what it means to live like human beings," he would say.

¹ *Basmachi*—Counter-revolutionary bandits who operated in Central Asia after the revolution.

"Then they will understand the meaning of Soviet life and what fellows like us in the Red Army stand for. Just imagine! They plow the soil with goat horns! Yet how they can sing, though I have never heard them sing a cheerful song! We should show them one of our dances to the tune of an accordion!"

"They are savages all right," concluded Klimov, the cook, an old soldier who had fought in the Russo-Japanese War and was the only professional soldier in the detachment.

"They are not savages," objected the Commissar. "They have their own forms of culture in spite of the fact that they are so oppressed. They need only to be shown how to live. Do you think they do not have their own bourgeoisie and landed gentry to hold them down? Do you think they have no desire to live better? Poverty is their bane. The mountains keep them from getting a glimpse of a better life. Are there not plenty of backward people among us? Look at Medvedev—a plucky chap—one of our best Red Army men and a qualified truck driver, and yet he has never joined the Young Communist League. And now he is too old."

"There were plenty of things I did not understand before joining the detachment," said Alexander with a shade of injury in his tone.

"Do you understand them now?" asked the Commissar with a smile.

"Of course I do. I would join the Bolshevik Party without a moment's hesitation if—"

"If what?" put in the Commissar quickly. "Go ahead and join. I will give you a recommendation."

"It isn't that which stops me," said Alexander Medvedev in some embarrassment. "But—what have I ever done for the Party?"

The Commissar had a long talk with him about his army record, speaking of the courage he had displayed that time when all by himself he had held back the enemy at the entrance to a gorge; or the other time when he had rescued a wounded comrade and had swum with him for two hours in a mountain river; or still another time when—

The Commissar recalled many such incidents, adding that Medvedev's greatest services had been rendered in fighting the basmachi.

In reply to all this, Medvedev said modestly. "But I was only doing my duty."

"Does it mean nothing to do your duty?"

"That is different. I want to do something without any necessity—only because I want to—to struggle for the new life with all my heart. Anybody can learn to shoot!"

Even the Commissar had difficulty in figuring out what he meant by "with all my heart." He said that all the members of the detachment were fighting "with all their hearts" and that all their activities were aimed at helping the local people become Soviet.

"But it is taking so long!" insisted Medvedev stubbornly. "If only I could do something to speed up the process!"

"So that is what you want!" joked the Commissar. "All right then, suppose you remain here among these people and help." Everybody laughed, but Alexander Medvedev became silent and thoughtful.

Then Commissar Karavayev had been killed in battle, and after that—

Sho-Pir sat there remembering what had happened after that, and in the meantime Nisso and Baktior were carrying on an animated conversation.

"Can you not buy yourself a wife, Baktior?" asked Nisso like a grownup.

Baktior tried to explain that it would not be right for the Chairman of the Village Soviet to buy himself a wife and nobody would want to give him one for nothing. And besides, there was no one whom he liked especially. He was simply a good comrade to all of them; he was even quite friendly with some of the girls, but he had to keep the fact a secret from their parents and husbands, "for all of them are oppressed by their husbands and fathers and need to be liberated from the masculine yoke."

These words woke Sho-Pir from his dreams. He looked up to see Baktior turning his spoon in his porridge.

"You had better take up the hem of her tunic, Naná," said Sho-Pir. "Look, she catches her feet in it."

"Where are my clothes?" asked Nisso quickly. "I could mend them. Did you not find them, Naná?"

"No, a dev must have stolen them," answered the old

woman good-naturedly. "Your dev I guess, Nisso, I cannot tell whether it is a good one or a bad one yet."

"Are you sure that Nisso has a dev, Gulriz?" asked Sho-Pir. "Perhaps the clothes simply fell into the stream."

"Everybody has a dev," said Gulriz decisively. "No one exists without a dev. The clothes could not have fallen into the stream because I left them on the porch."

"It was dark," added Baktior. "Maybe Ashtar-i-Kalon crept up out of the river and now the clothes are residing in its belly."

"Can you think of nothing worse?" asked Sho-Pir sarcastically.

"There could be nothing worse than the belly of Ashtar-i-Kalon," said Baktior.

"How do you know?" asked Sho-Pir, narrowing his eyes.

"I know all right."

"Have you ever seen the Dragon?"

"No. If I should see it I would die. Anyone who sees it dies."

"Nonsense, Baktior! It is a disgrace for you, Chairman of the Village Soviet, to believe in dragons. No one has ever seen them and no one has ever died at their hands."

"It is true," said Baktior sullenly. "Any one who sees them dies on the spot."

"No, you are wrong!" broke in Nisso suddenly. Her words rang out with such conviction that everyone turned to her in surprise.

"How do you know?" asked Sho-Pir teasingly. "It seems to me that Baktior is right. There are dragons after all. What do you think?"

"I—I—perhaps—only—" Nisso looked at Sho-Pir in some doubt. "No, of course you know better."

"Why should I know better, Nisso?"

"Because—because pirs always know better."

"What have pirs to do with it? Am I a pir?"

"You? You are more than a pir. You are the pir of pirs!"

Sho-Pir laughed so loud that Nisso became uneasy. "What have I said that was stupid?"

"Did you hear, Baktior?" asked Sho-Pir through his laughter. "Hear who she takes me for? Just imagine! It turns

out that I am a sort of god. That nickname of mine is to blame!"

When he had had his laugh, Sho-Pir became quiet and thoughtful. Everyone waited for what he would say.

"It is too soon for you to understand, Nisso," he said softly, turning to the girl. "And probably no one here could understand. There is a foreign word—machine."

He fell silent and once more set to musing over his past life and his former occupation which no one here could understand. How many different specialities had he acquired here in the High Mountains! He had learned to make doors, beds, tables, and stools in his effort to teach these people the advantage of their use. He had built this strange house. He had figured out how to lay explosives and blow up a granite cliff. He could load horses, camels and donkeys as well as any caravan leader. He had learned to make undershirts out of coarse homespun, to put splints on a broken arm and to prepare salve for treating trachoma. He could find his way by the stars and the shifting light on the snow peaks. He could make paper of the roots of the mulberry tree and make a float out of inflated goat skins. What was he these days? A carpenter and a doctor, a tailor and a hunter. In addition to which he was a specialist on farming and irrigation. Yes, he had taken on a good dozen trades in exchange for the one he had practised before the catastrophe which led him to volunteer in the Red Army.

At the memory of what had happened his face became distorted with pain and hate. It was impossible to speak of it, and would be better not to think of it. But he could think of the Red Army. Baktior and Gulriz already knew all about the roaming of the detachment through the mountains in pursuit of the basmachi. They could understand that. But how could he make Nisso and Gulriz and even Baktior understand the civilization of large cities, the technical achievements of the 20th century, the railroads and highways? How could he make them understand his former occupation if they had never seen not only an automobile, but even a simple wheel, and if the only roads they knew were the dizzying paths winding above the precipices?

Sho-Pir looked into the eager, expectant eyes of Nisso and half-jokingly began to explain to her that in those distant

regions so unlike the one in which she lived he had been a driver of fire-horses. These horses had neither hide nor flesh nor head nor brain nor heart. They were made by man of wood and iron, and people on the other side of the mountains rode them. He explained that there were places so flat that you could travel for a whole month without seeing a single mountain.

After his long story, he added, "There is a word in our language for the person who drives and takes care of such horses. He is called a driver, or sometimes a 'chauffeur.' When I first came here—you probably remember, Baktior, how Bobo-Kalon said to me, 'Who are you?' And I answered, 'A chauffeur.' Try to say 'if,' Nisso. You see it is difficult, because you have no such sound in your language. It comes out 'p' when you say it. And so that is what Bobo-Kalon called me—Sho-Pir. It is not my fault if in your language that means 'Pir of Pirs.' We have no such word in our language. They were laughing at me when they called me that, Nisso. But now do you understand what a machine is?"

"I cannot tell, Sho-Pir," said Nisso thoughtfully. "Perhaps I understand."

"Some day you will understand more clearly. Today I shall show you another kind of machine. But first explain to me why you said it was not true when Baktior declared that anyone who saw Ashtar-i-Kalon would die?"

"Because I saw the Dragon," said Nisso under her breath.

"What?" said Sho-Pir with a smile. "In your dreams?"

"In my dreams I also saw it. At night."

"And you remained alive?"

"You see I am alive. And now I am no longer afraid."

At this point Gulriz interrupted.

"Stop talking about Ashtar-i-Kalon! You must not mention it."

"Will you tell me about it some other time, Nisso?" asked Sho-Pir calmly.

Nisso did not immediately reply, and when she did she was very serious.

"Perhaps I shall tell you, Sho-Pir."

After dinner they all turned back to the house. Nisso asked Gulriz for a large wooden plate, saying that she wanted to bring the berries she had gathered. When she had disappeared in the darkening orchard, Sho-Pir went into the house and brought out an old gramophone.

"Do you want to show it to her?" asked Baktior.

"Sh-h!" said Sho-Pir mysteriously with a wink to his friend. "Put the mat under the plane tree before she comes back."

He sat down on the mat next to Baktior and quickly adjusted the bright blue horn. Then he selected a record, and after putting in a new needle set the gramophone going. He himself moved off to one side. Gulriz remained in the house; she still had some misgivings concerning this box "packed with dev's," and preferred listening from a distance.

As soon as the song to Pushkin's verse "I Remember the Wonderful Moment" was heard, Baktior jumped up.

"I shall call her," he said.

"Sit down," said Sho-Pir, pulling his arm. "And do not look in her direction. Let her think that we have forgotten all about her."

Baktior remembered how frightened he himself had been the first time he had heard that voice, and he could hardly keep from laughing. Sho-Pir sat calmly leaning against the trunk of the tree.

The words of the stirring song rang through the orchard. Sho-Pir did not look around when, with a rustling of branches, Nisso peered cautiously out from among the trees. But Baktior was convulsed with laughter where he sat with his back to her. Nisso watched and listened intently. She carefully placed her plate full of berries on the grass and approached the strange box, sitting down on the edge of the mat to listen. Not a single gesture expressed surprise. After carefully studying the face of Sho-Pir, who betrayed not the slightest interest in her, she turned her delighted gaze to the horn and remained watching it with parted lips. She seemed to be drinking in the music with every fibre of her being.

When the song ended, she sighed and turned to Sho-Pir, who was now watching her.

"What is that, Sho-Pir?" she asked.

"A machine."

"Where is the man?"

"What man?"

"Whose soul is in here," said Nisso, pointing to the horn.

Sho-Pir did not even smile. "He is far away from here. You would have to walk for a whole year to reach him. There is a city which is the biggest city belonging to the Russians and to all the peoples under Soviet power. That city is called Moscow. Have you ever heard that word before?"

"No, Sho-Pir."

"Remember it. Moscow. The man whose voice you have just heard lives in Moscow. But the soul expressed by the words of the song belonged to a great Russian named Alexander Pushkin."

"Does he also live in Moscow?"

"No, Nisso. He is dead. He died ninety years ago. Why are you not laughing now, Baktior? You had such a hard time keeping from laughing."

The embarrassed Baktior found no words to reply, and Nisso asked impatiently,

"Who feeds his soul?"

Sho-Pir suppressed a smile.

"That is difficult for you to understand. Nisso, but I shall try to explain."

And he undertook an explanation of the construction of the gramophone. Nisso listened without saying a word, only nodding her head from time to time. At last she declared that she had understood everything except how the voice could go on living forever without food or drink. But this too became clear when Sho-Pir said that there was oil in the machine, for without oil it would not work.

"Is it long since you have fed it?" asked Nisso.

"Very long," answered Sho-Pir. "Not since they made it, back in Moscow."

Then Nisso asked if Sho-Pir himself had brought it from Moscow. He explained that he had not, but that Hudodod had brought it from the Volost when he had taken the mail in the spring. He added that there were some fine people in the Volost who had presented them with many other things such as tea and tobacco and soap.

Nisso and Baktior and Sho-Pir spent the whole evening playing the limited supply of records over and over. Nisso was not impressed by the dance music and marches, but she asked again and again for the songs. As she listened, she marveled at the mysterious powers of Sho-Pir who could bring into the world a human voice without a body.

Gulriz did not come out of the house, and when Sho-Pir went to look for her he found her milking a goat in her quarters, which were like all the other houses in Siatang. Without turning around she announced that she was not afraid of the machine in the least, but she could hear everything from where she was and had no time to leave.

At last Sho-Pir closed the gramophone and placed it in a corner of his room. Nisso demanded a detailed explanation as to who Pushkin was and whether or not he had been a good man. Sho-Pir explained as best he could, so that Nisso had the impression that the man whose soul lived in the machine was the finest person who had ever been born.

Everyone went to bed when the moon came up. As on the previous night, Nisso slept in Sho-Pir's room, while he lay on the mat under the plane tree. The girl lay for a long time with wide open eyes, and as soon as she was sure that everyone was asleep, she quietly got up and went over to the gramophone. Crouching down in front of it, she placed her ear to the horn and listened attentively. No sound issued, but Nisso continued to listen as though she was afraid to wake up whoever was hidden in the box. Suddenly she remembered that Gulriz had left a pitcher of goat's milk out on the porch. Stealthily she brought it into the room and poured it in a thin stream into the horn of the gramophone.

The milk disappeared with a gurgle. Nisso stopped for a minute to give the horn a rest before offering it another drink.

"Probably it has had enough," she said to herself. "Tomorrow I shall give you some more, Pushkin," she added as she placed the pitcher on the floor.

Placing her ear once more to the horn, she heard sounds that convinced her that the machine was satisfied, so she returned to bed.

"Now he will be good to me," she thought with a shake of her head. "How long he must have gone hungry!"

When she woke up at dawn she was amazed to find the gramophone standing in a puddle of milk. Frightened and perplexed by the instrument's refusal to accept the sacrifice she had offered with the best of intentions, she hurriedly wiped the floor with a rag she found on the doorstep and took the empty pitcher back to the porch.

"No one must know of what happened," decided Nisso, and sadly went off to a distant corner of the orchard where she spent the entire day alone with her forebodings. Apparently she was not worthy of any of the good things in life. Probably the curse of Aziz-khon was upon her. But Sho-Pir had deceived her and made fun of her. To be sure he was a great Russian pir, strong enough to master the powerful Russian devs called 'machines.' These devs were also of various types—good and bad and large and small, and naturally it required a very strong person to control them. But why should Sho-Pir have deceived her? Perhaps he simply did not wish to reveal the whole truth. Perhaps something dreadful happened to people who revealed the whole truth. If that were so, she was ready to forgive Sho-Pir, for she would not do him harm for anything in the world.





CHAPTER FIVE

I

BAKTIOR glanced out of his shelter. The sun had not yet risen over the mountain tops, but already it illumined the snow of the peaks. It was time to go to the canal.

According to Siatang custom, Baktior slept naked under his blanket. He shivered as he began to dress out there in the cold air. Having pulled on his baggy trousers, his vest and his robe, he clambered down the ladder.

Sho-Pir still lay under the plane tree, wrapped from head to foot in a blanket. Baktior decided not to wake him up. "He will wake up himself and come along later."

His thoughts turned to Nisso, who was probably fast asleep in Sho-Pir's room. He made his way towards the gap in the wall, thinking as he went that he must build an addition to the house, for soon the autumn winds would begin and then Sho-Pir could not sleep out in the orchard. Stepping through the gap in the wall, he jumped lightly from stone to stone and began to descend to the settlement from which the light smoke of hearth fires was already rising.

No one had yet come to the fortress, so he sat down on a stone and waited.

He was accustomed to being the first one to arrive; he knew that the second would be Hudodod, Secretary of the Village Soviet, who would be followed by Karashir with pickaxe and shovel. The three of them would begin to clear away the debris lying in the path of the future canal.

The others would come later, all at once. But they would not begin to work until they had dug a hole for their tobacco, and had a good draw through the straw.

All day long the walls of the canyon would re-echo with the scraping and sliding of the boulders being removed, the ring of metal tools and the idle talk of the faqirs.

And all day long the haughty Bobo-Kalon, former owner of the fortress, would sit at the arched doors of the ancient tower which leaned slightly over the river. He would not exchange a single word with the faqirs, who in their turn would pay no more attention to him than to the stones lying along the path.

The sun was not yet up, but its light gradually increased, creeping down the sides of the mountains. Baktior walked along the uncleared bed of the canal figuring out what work had yet to be done, estimating how and where to remove each boulder, striving to foresee every difficulty in order to consult Sho-Pir in good time.

That Sho-Pir was a sly one! He never gave orders to the workmen. If they came to him, he would say: "Ask Baktior." Then he would listen to Baktior's answer. If he considered it correct, he would pretend not to have heard; if incorrect, he would call Baktior to one side and say: "You better think that over a bit." Baktior would ponder the matter while Sho-Pir waited for his opinion. If again Sho-Pir was dissatisfied, he would insist on Baktior's thinking it over some more.

Baktior had learned very much from Sho-Pir, so that now he could manage the work very well alone. If another canal had to be built, Baktior could probably handle the job without any help.

Hudodod soon came up the path with his pickaxe over his shoulder. He was thin and still very young, but his muscles were strong and he worked well and cheerfully. He would sing a gay song while upturning the heaviest rocks.

Hudodod came up to Baktior winking his lively, mischievous eyes and calling out, "Good health to you!" Sticking his pickaxe in the ground, he stood looking down the path along which other faqirs were coming.

At last the sun rose over the edge of the mountains, flooding the fortress with warmth and light. And now the sun-burned bodies of the canyon-men flashed among the ruins of the tower. They had begun to work with a clanging of shovels and pickaxes and a thudding of dislodged rocks.

But Karashir and a few others who worked on the canal had not yet arrived. Baktior fumed as he waited for them; their absence upset the working plans which it had taken him a whole morning to devise.

Every day he had to run back to the village to wake up delinquent workers and hurry them out to the construction site as though they did not understand that the water would be for their own use! Railing at today's absentees, Baktior entrusted the supervision of the work to Hudodod while he himself hastened down to the village.

The little hovel third from the end was the home of Issof. He was not yet old and could work well, but he had a bad disposition—always muttering, complaining, finding fault. Baktior disliked him because he still lived according to the old law.

The Chairman of the Village Soviet entered the hovel without knocking and found Issof sleeping on a bare stone ledge with a ragged robe thrown over his naked body. Issof's hearth was cold, and there was no sign of food or dishes in the room. Ever since Issof's young wife Saukh-Bogor had gone to the Upper Pastures, no one had wakened him in the mornings, and he himself was capable of sleeping twenty-four hours a day. To be sure he was weak: three apricot trees could hardly sustain him the whole year, and he had not even one mulberry tree. His two goats and one lamb had been in the Upper Pasture all summer, and the wheat patch behind his house was so tiny that even a good harvest would supply him with flour for no more than a month.

Baktior knew all this very well, but once Issof had promised to work and was expecting his share of the flour Sho-Pir had promised to distribute when the caravan arrived, he had no business sleeping all morning. Baktior nudged him angrily.

"Huh? Oh, is it you Baktior?" asked Issof, uncovering his sleepy face, disfigured by smallpox and the unkempt beard bristling from it. "Go away! Let me sleep!"

"You are as lazy as a sayid, Issof!" said Baktior angrily. "Letting everyone else work while you sleep! And making me come after you to wake you up!"

"Wake up! Wake up!" The devil with that work! Why should I hurry? You might think I was a woman having a baby!" Issof once more thrust his head under the robe.

Baktior yanked off the robe and hurled it into a corner of the hut, after which he stalked out. Issof squirmed on the stone bench, raised himself lazily, scratched, searched for

his robe with sleepy eyes, threw it around his shoulders, and went sleepily out into the sunlight which made him squint as he set off yawning toward the fortress.

Meanwhile the energetic and businesslike Baktior was going from one hut to another, waking up other canyon-men and calling them to task without paying the slightest attention to their excuses. One by one they came out on the path leading to the fortress. "Naturally we have to work, but the world would not come to an end if Baktior let us sleep a while longer," was their opinion.

Further down the slope among a cluster of boulders stood the house of Karashir shaded by two mulberry trees. A stone fence encircled the house and a small shed stood nearby; here grazed a decrepit donkey and two emaciated goats, who had long since learned to live together in peace and friendship. Beyond the stone wall could be seen the glow of wheat ripening among the rocks. The paths here were as confusing as a labyrinth, but the wheat brightened them with its golden fullness; only Karashir and his wife Fish Bones knew how much earth they had had to bring to this spot in order to sow that wheat.

The gap in the wall was blocked by stones. Baktior jumped over them and went around to the back of the house, where he found a group of children playing on the doorstep. They immediately crowded about him, but he had no time for them now.

"Karashir!" he cried. "Are you home?"

Fish Bones appeared sullenly in the doorway.

"He is home, but you have come in vain, Baktior. He will not work today."

"Why not?"

"Come and see." With compressed lips, Fish Bones stood back from the door, nodding to Baktior to enter. He stooped and stepped over the threshold, but immediately stopped on catching the sweet, heavy odour of opium. In one of the dark corners he made out the figure of Karashir, who was muttering hoarsely with his head and arms hanging over the side of his bunk, angling for something visible only to him.

Baktior coughed and hastily jumped back through the door.

"How could you have let this happen, Fish Bones?" he asked in a rage.

The woman looked at him with brimming eyes.

"How did I know? How could I have known? When I came home I found him like that. All evening he was like that and all night. Now it is morning and he is even worse."

"Where did he get it?"

"I don't know," said Fish Bones uncertainly. Then she added firmly and angrily, "I don't know! I don't know anything!"

"Very well. If he ever gets his head back on his shoulders, tell him for me that when we divide up the new land I will not give him an inch!"

"What do you mean?" cried Fish Bones, clutching his arm. "May your breath turn to ice for saying such a thing!"

"I will not give him an inch!" insisted Baktior angrily. "The land is not for smokers of opium!"

"You will not give him an inch?" shouted Fish Bones in fury with her arms on her hips. "He gave up planting the land up on the cliff just so he could help build the canal. You are an authority, and you promised him land. You are not to be trusted. You are a follower of Sho-Pir! May both of you be impaled on the horn of a cow!"

Baktior spat in disgust and went away. He felt insulted. How many times had he talked to Karashir about giving up opium, and Karashir had made him all kinds of promises. Of course he should not receive any land! Let him live on his opium if he enjoyed it so much! It was all the doings of that accursed merchant!

Baktior hastened to the merchant's shop, where he found Mirso-Hur sitting on a rug in the doorway drinking tea. Baktior stalked past him into the shop and shouted in fury:

"Where is the opium? Give me the opium!"

Mirso-Hur put down his bowl.

"Where would I get opium? I have not had opium for a long time. The Village Soviet made it illegal to sell opium, and I have had to obey. For a long time I have not sold opium. And there is none in my shop."

"You say there is none in your shop? You are lying, you son of a wolf! If you refuse to give it to me, I shall take it myself!"

And before Mirso-Hur could stop him, Baktior had made for the shelves and pulled them down one after the other.

dumping the goods on the floor. The merchant rushed over to him, but Baktior scattered the things over the rug with his foot. He immediately found a small bag of opium, which he grabbed up, dashing with it out of the shop and making straight for the steep bank of the river where, with a wide sweep of his arm, he flung the bag into the water. Mirso-Hur pursued Baktior in blind rage, threatening him with a knife which he snatched from under his robe.

"Thief! Accursed thief! You are as good as dead already!"

Baktior turned and jumped aside, grabbing up a large stone as he did so. His lips trembled and his body was as taut as a drawn bow-string.

"Come get me. Come on!"

But the merchant retreated in fright, realizing that Baktior might easily kill him. He slunk back to his shop, into which he stumbled, panting and gasping and giving vent to a storm of invectives as he closed the door behind him.

"Just wait, despicable one! That opium will cost you dearly! May the pigs devour your filthy soul!"

Baktior slowly lowered his arm, transferring the stone from one hand to another without comprehending how he happened to have come by it. When at last he realized what had happened, he threw the stone away and slowly made his way along the uneven path following the river. He began to think that perhaps he had been too impulsive and should have acted differently. He was displeased with himself, and feared that Sho-Pir, to whom he was accustomed to confide everything, would also be displeased by his behaviour. Perhaps this once he should not tell him.

He was gloomy and taciturn as he entered the fortress and began to help the faqirs. For some time he avoided Sho-Pir, and when the latter finally came up to him and asked where he had been, Baktior bent over a heavy slab of granite and answered casually as he attempted to lift it:

"I had an affair to attend to. Everything is all right now."

Sho-Pir glanced at him in surprise, but realizing that he would get no satisfaction from him at the moment, he went over to one of the faqirs and began talking to him. Baktior was so tortured by indecision that he was quite unaware of what was going on about him.

When he saw that Baktior had calmed down, Sho-Pir returned to him.

"Why has Karashir not come to work, Baktior?" he asked.

"He will not work any more," replied Baktior sullenly. "I have made a decision: Karashir is not to get any land."

"Really!" exclaimed Sho-Pir, narrowing his eyes. "Are you in earnest?"

"Of course I am in earnest!" said Baktior, his anger overflowing. "Why should we give him land? He is a fraud. He is against Soviet power!"

"Easy there, my friend. Don't talk nonsense. What has happened?"

"He has been smoking opium, do you understand?"

"The devil you say! Where did he get it?"

"The merchant had some hidden away, may he choke to death!"

"H-m-m," Sho-Pir was silent a moment. "Well, listen, Baktior. If Karashir is smoking opium, that is a very bad thing. But you will have to cancel that decision of yours. Do you think he smokes because he has such an easy time of it? He is the poorest of the poor, and all of a sudden you decide that he shall not get any land. You say it was the merchant who gave him the opium, so it is against the merchant you must fight. Can't you understand, foolish man?"

"Should I tell him or not?" thought Baktior. "Better not," and he roughly shook off the hand of Sho-Pir as he got up and went over to thrust his pickaxe under a boulder which Issof was trying to overturn.

The two men strained and struggled until the boulder was dislodged. Then Issof straightened up, wiped his brow on the sleeve of his robe and said:

"Baktior!"

"What?"

"So we shall give Karashir land anyway?"

"Of course we shall," replied Baktior with a good-natured smile. "Sho-Pir is right. I am too hotheaded."

Issof glanced about, and on catching sight of several old men whom he thought would back him, he said:

"I have been thinking that we should give Bobo-Kalon some land too."

"What?" said Baktior with a frown. "Give land to the grandson of the Khan?"

"Don't be angry, Baktior," Issof hastened to put in. "That is what I think. See him sitting there and watching us? Is he not a human being like us? We get everything and he gets nothing. Do you think that is right? Now he too is poor. What does he possess? There are no Khans any more and nothing which they had is left to him. He is a good man who does us no harm."

The faqirs put down their spades and pickaxes: such a discussion was worth listening to. Baktior cast a glance full of hatred at Bobo-Kalon where he sat beside his tower.

"Have you forgotten what we used to pay him?"

Issof remained undaunted:

"That time has passed. The old man is a pitiable sight these days."

Baktior flared up again.

"Did he ever pity us? Do not fear, he will manage all right. He should have died long ago."

"Hush, Baktior! He may hear you!"

"Let him hear!" and Baktior purposely raised his voice. "Let him hear! We all know that he is a dog whose wolf's tail has not yet dried up! I worked for him when I was a boy. I know his filthy soul! Give him land? Let him use his filthy beard to plant wheat in!"

Issof took up his pickaxe, while one of the faqirs said:

"Baktior is right, Bobo-Kalon should not get any land. You are wanting to place a stone around your own neck, Issof."

Baktior cursed under his breath and moved off to one side, vengefully kicking the stones out of his path.

That evening as Sho-Pir and Baktior were walking home together, the Russian thrust his hands into his pockets and began whistling a careless tune. Baktior kept twisting a twig in his fingers, but when he could endure the silence no longer, he cast it aside and said:

"I went to the merchant and threw away his opium."

"What do you mean, threw it away?"

"I grabbed it up and threw it into the river. He called me a thief and attacked me with a knife. I almost killed him with a stone. What would have happened if I had killed him?"

Sho-Pir made no answer. For some time they walked on, and Sho-Pir kept thinking that actually Baktior had done the right thing. It would have been difficult to confiscate the opium, for the canyon-men were yet too timid and hesitating to take action against the merchant. For them it seemed natural to live dependent on someone else and to have a passion for opium. It was not enough to keep reading them lectures. If only—

"Yes, Baktior!" exclaimed Sho-Pir suddenly. "It is our bad luck that the border is still open. There is not a single post along our frontier. If there were, a dozen border guards would make quick work of such violations!"

Then with a threatening shake of his fist, he cried out in a voice that made Baktior jump back in fright:

"Damn those mountains! It is high time we pushed them over!"

After that outburst he became silent and thoughtful. The two friends skirted the village and climbed the hill to their orchard. On reaching the gap in the wall, Sho-Pir stopped and looked searchingly into Baktior's eyes:

"This is how we shall act in respect to the merchant, Baktior," he said. "We shall carefully follow his every movement, collecting a mass of evidence against him which when the time comes we shall present before a meeting. Then before anybody has a chance to cool off we shall chase him out of here. Do you agree with this plan?"

"We shall do whatever you say," answered Baktior. "If only we get rid of the stink of him!"

2

During the summer the canyon lies scorching under the direct rays of the sun, but a cool breeze heralds the coming of autumn. The breeze descends in waves from the mountains, bearing with it the intermittent jingle of tambourines coming from the tiny fields of Siatang. When Gulriz withdrew her eyes from her knitting long enough to glance down on the yellow mosaic of the fields, she could see the women in their white tunics shaking these tambourines. As long as the wheat remained unharvested it was necessary to beat them

from morning to night in order to scare away the birds which kept greedily pecking at the grain.

But as she sat there on the porch, Gulriz was more interested in studying the red, yellow, green and blue wools with which she was working. Four wooden needles flashed in her bony brown fingers. The face bending over the knitting was deeply lined, but the old woman's hair was touched with grey only at the temples. The artificial braids plaited into her hair ended in thick woolen tassels dyed black.

Her braids did not get in Gulriz' way; she thrust them over her shoulder and they lay coiled on the felt mat beside her. The thickness of the homespun white tunic she was wearing could not conceal the angularity of the old woman's figure, but in her bearing and the sure movements of her hands could be discerned the natural grace of the mountain women.

The stocking which she was knitting would grow into a brightly patterned bag, unturned at the heel. And the design, which was dictated by her unfettered fantasy, did not resemble any of those innumerable designs which the women of Siatang wove into their stockings. The art of knitting such stockings had been known in Siatang from time immemorial, but was unknown beyond the mountains.

Nisso was sitting alongside of Gulriz, with her bare legs tucked up under her, helping unwind the wools so brightly coloured with vegetable dyes. She carefully watched the intriguing development of the pattern, for Nisso was eager to possess the old woman's skill. For several days Nisso had been sitting beside Gulriz and following every movement of her agile fingers. After each lesson she had secretly gone off to a distant corner of the orchard sheltered by the thick foliage of mulberry trees, where she had sat down beside the wall and made her first attempts at knitting. Nisso had no wool of her own and she dared not ask Gulriz for even a single ball of this precious material. So she gathered up the colourful little ends discarded by the old woman and tied them together to use for practicing. What if the first stocking were crooked and lumpy with knots! At least she had made it herself, without any outside help. And when it was finished she would bring it to Gulriz and say, "See? I too know how; now you can give me some coloured wool and I shall knit some real

stockings. I shall present them to. . . ." No, she would not tell her to whom she would present them, but. . . . It did not particularly matter that now Sho-Pir bound his feet in strips of cloth before pulling on his boots, but it would be dreadful if his feet should freeze in the winter because he had no woolen stockings.

The stream murmured. There was a pleasant breeze. The air was fresh and sweet today. Gulriz was thinking of her son, who had grown up to be an important person. He must be important, once they had placed local power in his hands. But it was hard to understand this power. Formerly if god had given power to a person, he had also given him riches and a wife. Riches, a wife, and power were like three woolen threads spun together to make the strong cord which was called happiness. But nowadays a person might have power, and yet no riches or wife. Gulriz could not understand this. To be sure, she and Baktior now had a house and even an orchard, whereas formerly they had had neither. Baktior kept saying, "We are rich." But he did not understand. Their house was still inhabited by poverty. They still had no land for sowing. The only plot Baktior had sown that year was on a tiny ledge high up in the mountains, at the very edge of the snow regions.

Stopping her work for a moment, Gulriz glanced above the village, and the Siatang River to the opposite side of the canyon; narrowing her eyes, she let them slide up the slopes, up the sheer heights, up the overhanging rocky cliffs, higher and higher to where the snow glistened on the jagged peaks. Just below them was a greenish brown patch scarcely discernible from where she sat. That was Baktior's field. It was cold up there. Perhaps the grain would not ripen. Perhaps it would freeze in the ground.

Gulriz dropped her eyes and continued knitting. From this land Baktior would harvest less grain than Bobo-Kalon had formerly given to his field workers. But poverty alone would not have been so bad: everyone was poor; even Bobo-Kalon did not have what he once had had. But how could a man live without a wife? If these were former times, when a man bought his wife, naturally Baktior would have had to remain a bachelor to the end of his days. But times had changed. Sho-Pir kept saying that nowadays men got married

only for love, without paying for their wives. Yet where could one find a wife whose relatives would not demand goods in exchange? There was freedom, but no free girls. Whom could Baktior find? But now fate had brought this girl to their house. She was beautiful, and a very good girl. Sho-Pir had said, "Do not make her work, Gulriz. Let her rest first and become accustomed to us. Then she will begin to work of her own accord." Gulriz had not said a word to her, yet she had been working for three days already. "Let me wash the dishes for you, Naná." "Here, let me wash the clothes." She had put the mulberries up on the roof where they were now drying. Yesterday morning she had boiled the beans for breakfast, while in the evening she had taken the donkey to the cliff where she had gathered a load of kindling. And now she was intent on learning how to knit stockings and was making great progress. She would make a fine wife!

Gulriz continued her old woman's musing without interrupting her knitting. If only it were true that once a man had power, he was sure to get a wife! In that case it would turn out that Nisso had come to their house because Baktior had power. Nisso was young. Why should she not love Baktior? He was strong and good—the best person in all the world. They would not have to pay anything for Nisso. And if she married him, maybe riches would also ensue.

3

Baktior walked up the valley toward the village of Siatang which formed a green background to the merchant's shop and the home of Karashir. Soon the water of the new irrigation canal would flow from the fortress, through the village, to the wastelands beyond. Next year this land would blossom forth in fields and orchards and no longer would the people have to fear famine. No one would live as well as the faqirs. How clever of Sho-Pir to have thought of building this canal!

The bed of the canal was practically ready throughout its entire course. It was necessary only to remove the largest boulders. He would go and have a look to see just how much remained to be done.

Baktior passed the merchant's shop and the home of Karashir, following the canal bed which ran alongside the path. But Baktior was thinking of Nisso.

Life had become more pleasant since she had made her appearance. Formerly when Baktior had left home in the morning, his thoughts had not reverted to it at any time during the day. But now, wherever his business took him, he felt a longing to return home and have a look at Nisso. It seemed that if he ran in for a minute there were a thousand things he would tell her all in a rush. But actually when he saw her he could not say a word. Strange how a man was made: thousands of words swarmed within him, but not one could be torn off his tongue. Although it was true that not all people were made that way. Sho-Pir, for instance, would sit talking to Nisso for a whole evening. How Baktior envied him! And Nisso was no longer like a wild thing. She would listen to his jesting and no longer take offence when he laughed at her. And she asked him so many questions that she would have worn out anybody else.

It hurt Baktior to see that she was different in her attitude toward him. To be sure she was very friendly, but she never gave him her confidence, while she had already told Sho-Pir all about herself. Last evening Sho-Pir himself had admitted knowing the secret of her life. "And a very simple one it is," he had said. When Nisso had gone to gather grasses called "harkshor" for the oil lamp, Sho-Pir had told them all about Duob and Nisso's aunt and Aziz-khon. Just to think that Aziz-khon himself had bought her for his wife! And still she had run away from him. But Sho-Pir had added, "Don't mention this to Nisso. Act as though you knew nothing."

She was a grown woman, and Baktior could not understand how Sho-Pir could treat her like a little girl. To be sure it was well known that Russian women got married later than their women, but still it was strange that Sho-Pir should not recognize her as a grown woman. Surely she should not wait until she was an old woman to get married.

Yesterday Baktior had said, "What shall we do with her?" And Sho-Pir had answered, "Let her go on living here. We shall inaugurate the first Soviet family." What

had he meant by that? When Baktior had questioned him, he had only laughed. Was he joking or in earnest? You could never guess. Perhaps he himself wished to marry her.

This thought filled Baktior with alarm. But the path branching off to their house was already behind him and Baktior was climbing the narrow trail to the fortress.

Nisso was very amusing. One day when Sho-Pir had been repairing the gramophone, she had watched him intently and then whispered, "The dev must have died." He had laughed as he took apart the mechanism and then put it together again. Nisso helped him. He handed her a little spring and said as he pointed to its place, "Put it there." She had dusted it and put it in place. Once again the voice sang, and Nisso said, "Now I know that I could learn to make such devs." Scarcely had she said it when the voice broke off. Once more they took apart the gramophone and discovered that the spring had snapped. "We must make another one just like it," said Nisso. "It can not be very difficult—only a piece of twisted wire." And Baktior had thought to himself, "Nisso is probably more clever than I am. I cannot make head or tail out of all those bits of iron." But still the machine was broken, and to Nisso's great disappointment Sho-Pir had said, "It requires special instruments to make a new spring like that old one."

Baktior's musings were interrupted by his coming upon an old, abandoned hovel, one of the walls of which had not yet been taken down, although Hudodod had long since been assigned this job. The wall was in the way, and Hudodod would have to be reminded of his task.

But there was no doubt that it would be a fine canal. The Khan's canal had skirted the village from above, with irrigation ditches leading down from it to water all the fields and orchards from the mountainside to the river. The banks of the river itself were too steep to allow of using its waters for irrigation, and since all the water from the canal was used up before reaching the riverside, the fields of the faqirs, the poorest class, had been relegated to this arid spot from time immemorial. They had never known what it was to have a sufficient water supply.

The new canal was built through the very centre of the village, so that it served all the fields and orchards without

exception. How the grain would flourish in the faqirs' fields once they became saturated with water!

Baktior had already crossed half the village and was highly pleased by his inspection of the canal bed. The men had worked splendidly. But there had been many arguments at first. In one place it had been necessary to tear down a wall standing in the way of the canal; in another it had been necessary to cut through somebody's garden. One person had cried, "I do not want to build a new wall!" Another had protested, "I do not want to lose part of my land by having the canal pass through it." Sho-Pir had tried to convince them by saying, "For the good of all." But each of them had shouted, "What do I care? It is my wall. Do whatever you like, but leave my wall alone!" And yet everything had been done as Sho-Pir had planned.

As Baktior turned into a narrow passageway between stone walls, he came upon a group of canyon-men, some of whom were standing at the entrance, others of whom were sitting on a flat stone shaded by mulberry boughs. They were having so heated an argument that they did not notice the approach of Baktior. The pale, dishevelled Karashir was making energetic gestures in his attempt to convince Issof, who was listening impatiently.

"But I say that the sun is at the ribs," cried Karashir. "Here, at the ribs," he repeated, poking his thumb in his side.

"You are wrong; it is not at the ribs," interrupted Issof sullenly. "It is only at the bottom of the throat."

"A lazy sun yours is! You do not know how to count!"

"I suppose you know how!" put in a young, broad-shouldered canyon-man with his head carelessly wrapped in sacking to serve as a turban.

Baktior went up to the men and leaned against the wall as he listened with interest.

"Yes I do. You can stop me if I make a mistake," said Karashir hotly. "For forty days the sun rested on top of the skull, am I right?"

No one could object. According to the Siatang calendar the sun indeed rested for forty days on top of the skull after rising from the toes.

"Certainly it rested there," said someone in the crowd. "But how do you calculate after those forty days?"

"This is how. What happened on the fortieth day? Two days before, Sohrab's little girl died and we buried her, am I right?"

"Go on, go on!" came the voices. "You are right—two days before."

"Three days later Husmat's donkey broke its leg, am I right?"

"You are right! Go on."

"On that day the sun left the skull and stopped on the forehead. For three days it was on the forehead. On the third day Zaynat had a quarrel with Hanim over a chicken, am I right? Then the sun moved down to the man's nose and stayed there for three days. On the second day after that Sho-Pir took the gunpowder to the tower and said we would blow it up the next day. You yourself said then, Issof, that there would be no more tower when the sun reached the teeth. Do you remember saying that?"

"I said it all right," agreed Issof, "but I do not remember whether it was on the second or the third day."

"You do not remember, but I do! The sun had been on the teeth for three days when we blew up the tower and the woman appeared among us. Is it so difficult to count? I did not go to the canal when the sun slid down to the chin. That was its first day on the chin."

"Wrong!" protested Issof firmly. "It was the second day. You have forgotten because you smoked the opium."

"I was ill one day."

"Not one day but two days."

"One—"

"Two, I tell you!"

Karashir glanced about helplessly and caught sight of Baktior leaning against the wall watching them in silence.

"Here, Baktior has come!" said Karashir triumphantly. "Tell us, Baktior, was it one day or two?"

"Two days," said Baktior with a short laugh. "Why should you argue?"

Everyone turned to him.

"I say that in six days' time we must harvest the grain," continued Karashir hurriedly. "Issof says in nine days. When the sun reaches the hips it will be too late. Then the strong winds will begin, when we must blow away the chaff. Will

we have time to drive out the bulls to grind the grain if we take our sickles to the fields only in nine days' time? All right, let us say that I was ill two days. Even so nine days is too long."

"Why argue about it?" said Baktior sarcastically. "Go to consult Bobo-Kalon. For thirty years he has been the one to calculate time. You yourselves claim that he is the wisest of the wise!"

"Is that what you say?" said Issof with a frown, then he suddenly pushed past the canyon-men and came up to Baktior. "Why do we not go to Bobo-Kalon? Because he could tell us nothing now. He made notches in the tower so that every step of the sun could be observed, and what has happened to that tower? Everybody once knew where the sun was, but now we have lost track of its course. We no longer know when to gather the harvest, when to lead out the bulls, when to sharpen our sickles. Karashir shouts, 'Today the sun is at the ribs!' I shout, 'At the throat!' Another shouts, 'At the stomach!' Where, I ask you, is the sun?"

"What does Bobo-Kalon say?" insisted Baktior, straightening up.

"What does Bobo-Kalon say? 'You blew up the tower; now it is up to you to follow the movements of the sun. Let Sho-Pir do your calculating for you now. Let Baktior do it.' That is what he says. And in addition he says that if we miscalculate the time, the winds will sweep the grain from under the hooves of the bulls, or the rains will cause it to rot. Everything will become topsy-turvy, he says, but he refused to calculate the time for us any longer."

"Well, let him refuse!" said Baktior, pushing Issof aside and making his way to the centre of the crowd. "I have come to tell you that in two days' time we must go to the fields with our sickles. Now Sho-Pir holds the time calculation in his hands. He has his own method of calculating, and he never makes a mistake. He counts day after day. He says there is no sense in figuring out whether the sun is at the hips or at the stomach or at the liver, when already the grain has ripened. While we wait for some particular day, the grain may spoil. Half the harvest can be lost while we argue about the sun. Sho-Pir and I inspected your fields and we found that the grain has already begun to fall. Tomorrow you must sharp-

en your sickles and the day after tomorrow everybody must go to the fields."

The speech of Baktior set the men arguing even more heatedly. They had lost track of the sun. It must be found. Each slightest event in the village had to be recalled in order to restore lost calculations. And how could they be expected to disregard them? This was not the first time Baktior had spoken about some unheard of "months" which were divided into equally unheard of "weeks." He counted the days like merchandise: the tenth, the fifteenth, the twenty-third. One time he counted to thirty and then began from the beginning, while another time for some reason he counted to thirty-one. Why should they adopt these new calculations when everyone knew that the sun revived after forty winter days when it rested frozen and motionless? Why should they have a new form of calculating when everyone knew that as soon as the rays of the revived sun fell on the dog which huddled in the corner, the beast exposed its thin pelt to the sun's warmth, whining with cold and asking to be admitted into the house. And the nine days during which the sun warmed the dog were called "the Time of the Dog." Then the sun turned to the master of the house and for three days rested on his toes. And everyone knew that "the sun had reached the Man," which meant that it was time to go to the fields and begin clearing them of the stones which had fallen during the winter. Then the sun began to climb, stopping for three days on the arch, three days on the ankle, three days on the calf, three days below the knee, three days on the knee. And in this way people knew when it was time to plow and to water the fields and to celebrate great and small holidays. The sun reached the crown of the skull in a state of exhaustion, and there it rested for forty summer days before once more descending to the toes. From time immemorial everyone had known with all certitude that the gathering of the harvest began on the day when the sun reached the lowest rib. And if the winds and cold set in sooner than desired, or if the grain had not fully ripened by this day, it was the will of god, who was punishing his people for something which had incurred his disfavour. There was nothing else to be said. It was necessary only to exactly determine the day. How could they have blown up the tower without first removing the notches

made by Bobo-Kalon? No one had thought of this, and Bobo-Kalon himself had said nothing. But once Baktior represented Soviet power, he should have thought of it, as should Sho-Pir, whom the canyon-men always obeyed.

"You have done a wrong thing, Baktior," said Issof hostilely. "We follow you because you represent Soviet power, the power of the poor, the faqirs. But why have you mixed up our calendar? How can we work in the fields? What will happen to our harvest if we cannot restore our calendar? You yourself know that we cannot ask for help in other villages because everywhere the sun moves differently. They have their own winds and their own frosts."

Baktior was at a loss, although he attempted to prove that he was right. It could not be denied that things had turned out badly. To be perfectly honest, he himself had not yet been able to make head or tail out of the calendar Sho-Pir proposed to the people of Siatang. It consisted of empty figures and names that had no connection with anything else. How could they be expected to understand it? He said, "Now it is August," but what in the world was "August"? Nobody could understand that word. How could they be expected to calculate their work in the orchards, in the fields, and in the Upper Pasture according to such a word? But of one thing Baktior was certain: if Sho-Pir said they should begin harvesting their crops in two days, they must surely do so. Everybody would be better off and the work would go smoothly if they took the advice of Sho-Pir. Even though he used his own Russian calendar and had lived here for so short a time, he knew as well as the canyon-men when the winds would begin to blow, when the grain would begin to drop, when the apples would begin to fall, and when the snows would block the path to the frozen pastures.

"At any rate," said Baktior. "In two days' time we must all go out to the fields. Sho-Pir has said so. I myself shall answer for the harvest."

"All right, we shall go," agreed Karashir at last. "I shall go if you answer for it. There will be a bad harvest this year anyway; we shall all go hungry."

"We shall not go hungry when the caravan arrives," replied Baktior curtly, and without waiting to hear the decision of the others, he left for his own home.

The canyon-men at first made a feeble attempt to revive the argument about the sun, but realizing that the exactness of their calculations could never be restored, they agreed to follow the directions of Baktior: once he promised that everything would be all right, he would have to answer for it. However, several of the old men announced that they would make their own calculations and go out to the fields when they considered it necessary. No one argued the matter, and soon the crowd dispersed.

When Baktior reached home he told Sho-Pir what had taken place. Sho-Pir smiled as he listened, and then said that the division of the year into months was the Soviet way of calculating; that the division of the months into days was also the Soviet way, and that therefore it was up to the Chairman of the Village Soviet to thoroughly understand the new system without fearing anyone's opinion. He must learn it by heart and gradually teach the other canyon-men to use it.

Two days later most of the canyon-men went out to the fields to gather the grain. Sho-Pir had the landless canyon-men who had been working on the canal help those who were old and weak. Those who had worked on the canal counted on having their labour paid for in flour when the caravan arrived. The grain was cut with sickles and the sheaves were placed on frames attached to the men's backs for carrying it to the clearing where it was threshed.

The new canal was almost finished. Only two more days were required to get it ready for releasing the water, but Sho-Pir announced that the celebration of the opening would take place only after the grain had been harvested and threshed.

4

Baktior was tinkering around near the porch, barefoot, his pants rolled up, a vest covering his bare chest, sorting out the stones he had brought from the bed of the stream. They were to form the foundations of an addition to the house. Baktior had not said as much, but Nisso could guess that the new room was to be hers.

Baktior had been working for two days, taking advantage of the fact that he could remain at home while nothing was

being done on the canal. He was working very industriously and was anxious that no one should help him.

The stones clicked as he put them in place, while from the valley below came the sound of tambourines which now died away, now rose in sharp and changing modulations as the breeze grew and waned.

Nisso and Gulriz were sitting side by side with their heads bent over their bright wools. While Gulriz knitted her socks, Nisso carefully gathered up all the discarded threads and clutched them in her fist.

Sho-Pir was writing in his notebook. He would raise his pencil whenever a new thought came to him, strike out what he had already written and go on scribbling. But now he got up and clasped his hands behind his head for a good stretch before meandering over to the porch.

"A bad harvest this year, Gulriz. I have figured it all out: if we set aside every bit of grain we harvest in order to sow it in the spring, we shall have to deprive ourselves of bread even now. If we begin to use it for flour, we shall not have enough for the sowing, and then what shall we do?"

"Now we have apples, berries, apricots, peas and beans. Why should we touch the grain?" asked the old woman severely. "We shall not die."

"But you understand, Gulriz, that for a whole year people have been dreaming of bread?"

"Dreaming of it, but not eating it. You say that the caravan is expected to arrive."

"It will come all right, but it will bring only flour—no grain. You cannot sow flour. People are hungry now; no one will want to wait for the caravan. And you see how long it is taking to get here. Soon they will begin to grind the grain and then we shall have nothing to sow in the spring."

After a moment's silence the old woman said sensibly,

"Think it over, Sho-Pir. Your head is a big one."

"What do you think, Gulriz?"

"Why should you ask an old woman? What can I say? Perhaps I shall say something foolish. It seems to me they should not grind the grain; they should wait for the caravan."

"You really think so?" The unexpected answer of the old woman seemed to Sho-Pir a simple and reasonable solution. But how could he keep the hungry people from eating

the grain they had waited for for so long? Yet the words of the old woman were worth considering.

"And what do you say, Nisso?"

Nisso turned quickly to Sho-Pir. Surely he must be mocking her by asking her opinion.

"I say nothing, Sho-Pir," she replied quietly as she plucked at the green thread.

"You frightened little rabbit! Just wait—we shall elect you to the Village Soviet yet!" Then, becoming serious, he turned to Gulriz once more. "I better go out to the fields and figure it out again. I myself am fed up with those peas. Are you going to give us pea porridge again today?"

Without waiting for the old woman's answer, he turned away from the porch lost in thought, directing his steps toward the golden fields below.

Gulriz noticed that Nisso followed him with her eyes, and the needles in the old woman's fingers flashed more quickly than ever.

5

Baktior led his donkey to the head of the canal to load his baskets with clay.

After sitting with Gulriz a while longer, Nisso decided that since the men were away, no one would be curious as to what she might be doing alone in the orchard, so she took herself off.

When she came to her favourite corner by the wall, she took her knitting from under a stone, shaking the dirt off the homemade needles before she had a look at her work. The stocking was turning out well. With an approving glance at the design, Nisso set to work. No one would disturb her there.

But a man was hiding behind the rocks on the other side of the wall. For two days he had been watching Nisso. For two days he had been seeking an opportunity to speak with her alone. He was annoyed at having had to lose so much time, but now at last Sho-Pir and Baktior were away and the girl was alone. He had already thought up a pretext for beginning a conversation.

Kendiry cautiously retreated in a large circle around the

rocks until he came to the foot of the cliff, from where he boldly sauntered toward Nisso.

Nisso felt no surprise whatsoever as she watched this man in the grey robe and tubeteika coming toward her. Probably he had some business with Baktior.

Kendiry climbed unhurriedly over the wall, pretending to have just caught sight of Nisso as he turned to her in greeting.

"Hello, dark eyes! Is Sho-Pir at home?"

"No," answered Nisso ungraciously.

"Is Baktior?"

"No."

Kendiry clicked his tongue and remained where he was.

"I must see them. I have some business to talk over."

With a sigh, Kendiry sat down next to Nisso. "I better wait for them."

Nisso lowered her head, and continued to work. Kendiry smiled, exposing his teeth and gums.

"You do that well," he said.

"No I do not," answered Nisso indifferently without glancing up. "I do not yet know how."

"Oh yes you do. Take that design, now. What is it? Yellow Wing Flower? Very good, but here you have made a mistake. You should use a yellow thread," said Kendiry, running his finger over the design, "or else the edge of the leaf will be curled under."

"Here? Why do you think so?" asked Nisso eagerly.

"I know that design. It will be more attractive if you do as I tell you."

Kendiry watched silently as Nisso finished the design of the leaf.

"This way?" asked Nisso.

"Yes. See how pretty it turns out? Do the next row the same way. But I have no time to be sitting here. Will Baktior be back soon?"

"He went to the head of the canal for clay."

"Maybe I should go there to meet him," mused Kendiry. "No, better to wait here." After a pause he again turned to Nisso. "They say you appeared out of the mountains?"

"Yes," murmured Nisso in a scarcely audible voice.

"Are you happy here?"

"Yes."

"Naturally. Sho-Pir is a fine man and so is Baktior. Thanks to them, we all live well these days. Not like life in Yakhbar."

"Why do you mention Yakhbar?" asked Nisso, and looked attentively at her neighbour for the first time. His narrowed eyes were focused on the mountain slopes above the wall.

"Because I used to live in Yakhbar," said Kendiry dreamily, as though unaware of Nisso's suspicious glance. "I left that place. If you had ever been there, you would have found out what life was like. There is not even a breath of fresh air for a poor man to breathe in that place. Nothing but the rod. If you were inclined to listen, I would tell you how bad it was."

Nisso's suspicions were supplanted by sympathy. She was about to share her opinion of Yakhbar with him, but she caught herself in time and merely asked:

"Are you from Yakhbar?"

"No," said Kendiry with a frown. "And I do not like Yakhbarians."

"I do not like them either. I have heard that they are bad people."

"Many bad ones," said Kendiry emphatically, "but there are some good ones."

"I do not believe there are any good ones."

"Yes there are. I know one. He also left there and now lives in Siatang."

Nisso's needles became quiet for a moment.

"Who is he? I do not know him."

"A poor merchant named Mirso-Hur. Have you heard of him?"

"No."

"Strange that Sho-Pir and Baktior have never mentioned him!" said Kendiry as he studied the expression of her eyes.

"They never have. At least I have never heard."

Kendiry turned to her.

"Ask them; they will tell you. He is a kind man who helps all of us. He helped even me. I came here as a poor barber, and he gave me clothes and a place to live without asking anything in return. He took me in as Sho-Pir has

taken you in. Are those stockings you are knitting for Sho-Pir?"

"Not especially—I am just learning. . . ."

"What kind of wool are you using?"

"The kind you see. I have no good wool."

Kendiry twisted the knotted thread in his fingers.

"Hm-ni. You know what? Mirso-Hur has some fine wool. He bought it because it is cold in the winter without woollen stockings, but he has no one to knit them for him. He lives alone. He is very good-natured. If I say a word to him he will give you the wool."

"I would have to pay him, and I have no money."

"He would give it to you for nothing. It is just lying around and rotting."

The temptation was enormous. Nisso could see the large balls of brightly coloured wool, and the long stockings reaching above the knees of Sho-Pir.

"I could not take it for nothing," she sighed.

Kendiry realized that his aim had been sure. He made believe that he was considering the question during a prolonged silence. Then in lowered tones he said that of course Nisso was right in not wanting to take the wool for nothing, but another arrangement could be made: the merchant was very anxious to find someone who would knit him at least one pair of stockings. If Nisso would agree to do this, he would give her wool for another pair. Thus she could earn the wool from which she would make stockings for herself or anyone else—for Baktior, for example, or even Sho-Pir, whom everyone knew wore Russian boots in which his feet would freeze in the winter.

Nisso forgot her knitting as she listened to Kendiry. She expressed her doubt that she could knit well enough to please the merchant. After all, she was only learning.

Kendiry quieted her fears by saying that he could see from the stocking she was now knitting that her doubts were unfounded. She had keen eyes and a rich imagination—the design was turning out splendid.

Kendiry suggested that Nisso immediately go with him to the merchant who lived not far away; she would have time to return before Baktior came back with his clay. And if she knitted the socks well, Mirso-Hur would give her or-

ders for other pairs. In that way she could begin to earn money to pay Baktior for her keep.

* * *

Nisso boldly followed Kendiry into the shop, but was slightly intimidated by the sight of the black-bearded man in an unfastened Yakhbarian robe sitting on a rug. He was reading an ancient manuscript of some sort, and suppressed his amazement at seeing Nisso only when Kendiry threw him a significant look.

"I have brought her to you, gracious Mirso-Hur," said Kendiry. "She had already heard of your kindness; I have told her that you are not of those Yakhbarians whom I so despise. She knows how to knit stockings well and has agreed to knit you a pair. Come with me to select the wool you will give her. It must be the very finest."

In a few minutes a pile of coloured wool lay in front of Nisso, and Mirso-Hur said:

"Take whatever you like. I would give anything to such a nice girl. And you will knit me a pair of stockings according to your own taste."

"That same design," added Kendiry seriously. "Make the Yellow Wing as I showed you. Do not hurry; take your time. But why are you without red braids? All the girls in Siatang wear red braids."

Nisso knew that, but Gulriz had no red braids, and young girls were not expected to wear black ones. How should she answer him?

"Give her some red braids, Mirso," said Kendiry shortly. "Let her wear them like all the other girls."

"Oh no," said Nisso in embarrassment. "I do not want any braids."

"Now, now, none of your false modesty," said Kendiry in a tone of gentle rebuke. "Once you are living among us there can be no question about it. Take them!"

Without waiting for the merchant's reply, Kendiry went to a Chinese trunk in a corner of the shop and from the pile of clothes it contained he pulled out a pair of red braids, a white tunic with an embroidered collar, and a flat tubeteika made of carpeting.

Nisso issued from the shop with a bag over her shoulder and in a state of excited confusion.

"I shall come to see Baktior another time," said Kendiry in parting. "Bring the stockings when you finish them, and may you enjoy the blessings of the Protector."

Nisso went around the orchard and climbed the wall at the secluded spot which she frequented. Knowing that no one would see her here, she dumped the contents of her bag on the ground.

On the grass lay an expensive Yakhbarian necklace made of thin slabs of lapis lazuli linked together with silver. Nisso lifted the necklace and rapturously examined it where it lay in her palm. In each of the polished stones, flecks of gold glinted like stars in the morning sky.

The eldest wife of Aziz-khon had worn such a necklace, and all his other wives had envied her. Nisso was reminded of the red beads which Aziz-khon had once placed about her neck. She had forgotten all about them that dreadful night when she had run away. The memory depressed her. As she studied the blue stones she realized that no amount of work could pay for them.

"Why did Kendiry have to put this in?" she thought with an aggravation amounting almost to anger.

But still she put on the necklace, and as she fingered the silver rings her joy overcame all doubts: the only thing she regretted was that she had no mirror. When she had played a while with the lovely stones she slipped out of Gulriz' ancient tunic and put on her new clothes and the bright tubeteika. Thinking only of how pretty she must look, she began to twine the red and tasselled woolen braids into her black hair.

6

A round clearing of no great size had been formed in the midst of lowering cliffs. This clearing, located as it was in the very centre of the Siatang Valley, yet isolated by a mass of jagged granite boulders hewn by superhuman forces, seemed a wild and formidable place. Yet the canyon-men had packed it down with clay brought from the head of the irrigation canal and adapted it as a threshing floor.

Several households would unite to bring two or three bulls to the clearing, where they would scatter the grain in an even layer and drive the animals in circles over it. In this way the wheat was crushed so that the grain sprinkled out on the threshing floor. No other method of threshing was known in Siatang.

Every morning the canyon-men brought their sheaves to the clearing, where they would sit on the rocks and engage in endless conversation as they waited their turn.

On the day that Sho-Pir went out to the fields to verify his estimations, and Kendiry took Nisso to see the merchant, Issof joined the canyon-men seated about the clearing. On his back he carried a mountain of sheaves representing the total harvest from his tiny patch of land.

He slipped off his burden and slumped down on a rock without speaking and without wiping off the perspiration which rolled in large drops down his thin, pockmarked face as he tried to catch his breath. Though he was only thirty-four years old, Issof looked like an old man.

Karashir had been sitting here from early morning waiting for Hudodod to bring the bull he had promised to borrow from one of his neighbours.

Karashir indicated the load Issof had dumped on the ground as he said:

"Is that all?"

"Yes. Crops for a whole year," murmured Issof unhappily.

"Even I have three times as much."

"Do not boast," said Issof licking the sweat off his lips.

"You will be as hungry as me. The Protector has decreed that the whole village shall suffer famine this year. And maybe some other misfortune will be added."

"What makes you think so, Issof?"

"Our village has sinned."

The canyon-men sitting on the rocks glanced at each other.

"How has it sinned?" asked Karashir.

"What shall I say? You have defied the Preordained."

Karashir slipped his hand under his sheepskin and scratched his hairy chest as he considered whether or not he should take offence. Just what did Issof mean?

"To be sure we have all neglected the Preordained these days," said Issof slowly. "We pay too much attention to Sho-Pir. Baktior has become the wisest of all."

Karashir usually defended Baktior, and Issof had counted on this. Karashir now stroked his hollow cheeks and then burst out angrily:

"All the wisdom in the world is not centred in your Bobo-Kalon!"

"Not all. Old judge Nauruz-bek is also a man of wisdom. Today I listened to his words. In important matters it would be well if we all heeded his advice."

Two emaciated bulls were circling unhurriedly over the threshing floor, and the rustle of the grain under their hooves hindered the canyon-men from hearing Issof. Apparently he had something very important to say. So they climbed down off their rocks and seated themselves silently about him. When all of them were listening attentively, Issof said, staring past the people:

"Kendiry has returned from Yakhbar."

No one said a word. They were waiting to hear what he would add. But Issof took his time. Of what importance were his words? Kendiry had often gone to Yakhbar and as often returned. But perhaps war had broken out in the High Mountains? Or perhaps the living god of the Ismailians demanded the taxes due from millions of the faithful? If this were true, it was indeed important news, for all the inhabitants of Siatang owed taxes to Aga-khon. No one had come to collect taxes since the pirs had left Siatang. Perhaps Kendiry had brought news of the coming of the khalifa, who would demand the immediate payment of all their debts.

"Speak, Issof," urged an impatient canyon-man with a matted grey beard, the owner of one of the bulls working on the clearing.

"I shall speak," said Issof, pulling himself out of his reverie and raising his head. "Kendiry has returned. He has whispered his news into the ear of the merchant and the merchant has told it to Nauruz-bek. Do you know Aziz-khon?"

"Who has not heard of him?" answered the owner of the bull. "He was once a great Khan."

"He is still a great Khan!" asserted Issof importantly. "All of Yakhbár is under his rule. The road leading to the big cities passes through his domains. If he wishes, he can close this road. If he wishes, he can cut off the supplies of Mirsohur. He is a person of great power."

Again Issof fell silent. When a simple faqir like Issof begins to speak of important things he must be listened to attentively. It seemed that some unseen force was behind his words. Everyone waited to hear what he would say next.

"In the spring Aziz-khon wished to buy himself a young wife. He took a beautiful maiden from our mountains. He paid forty pieces of money for her. He loved her. He offered her an easy life. Her name was Nisso. Have you ever heard that name?"

"What Nisso?" put in Karashir quickly. "Not that one?"

"I am speaking, Karashir!" said Issof raising his voice. "Or perhaps you would like to do the talking?"

The canyon-men glanced at each other uneasily and Karashir fell silent.

"That one!" exclaimed Issof slapping his knee. "That very one! The worthless slut ran away from Aziz-khon and we accepted her into our village, fools that we were! She lives with other men and we say nothing! The wrath of Aziz-khon will fall on our heads!"

Issof pronounced these last words threateningly. The canyon-men felt this very definitely and realized that it was a bad thing when a great man becomes incensed against little men. Each of those sitting about Issof had his own thoughts, but each of them realized that this was no trifling matter. Were it not for this new government in Siatang they would return the woman to Aziz-khon, saying that they had not known who she was. But she was living in the home of Sho-Pir and Baktior. Things were not so simple now.

Realizing this, Karashir said, "Perhaps Aziz-khon does not want her back? No doubt he loathes the very name of such a wife."

"Probably, but he wants her back nevertheless. It is none of our business what he will do with her when he gets her, but we must turn her over to her husband."

"Sho-Pir will never allow it," said Karashir decidedly. "Times have changed."

"The devil with Sho-Pir! Why should we discuss our affairs with foreigners?"

"He is not a foreigner. He does everything for our own good."

"He does everything for his own good! He has long arms!" said Issof angrily.

"You are wrong!" cried out a young canyon-man.

"I too say that you are wrong!" cried another as he jumped off the stones.

Encouraged by their support, Karashir also jumped up and went over to Issof, clutching his sheepskin about him.

"Shame on you for saying such a thing, Issof!" he said. "When you were the servant of a pir he used to kick you in the stomach. When I used to gather manure for the sayid he used to hurl stones at me. Who beats us now? Who has helped us if not Sho-Pir? He has been living here for three years, and what has he ever done for himself? Has he bought himself bulls and cows and horses and orchards? He has nothing at all. He eats the same pea porridge that we eat. You say that Baktior has a house and a cow and an orchard. Is that a bad thing? It is a good thing. Baktior was poorer than any of us. You have nothing, Issof, because you do not like to work. I have nothing because—well, everybody knows why: I have a sin on my soul; I lie ill with the smoke of a double life making me dizzy. And yet even through the smoke I can see that the water which will flow into the wastelands will be for our benefit. And it will flow thanks to Sho-Pir, do you understand? You say that now Sho-Pir has taken this woman. Very well, let him take her. He has not stolen her. She came of her own accord. Why should he not have a wife? Or perhaps she is for Baktior. Is he not a man too? A real man will not share his wife with anyone else. But they are good friends. They live together under one roof, but they do not quarrel. They do not kill each other, which means that nothing disgraceful is happening in their house. And you can be sure that soon we shall hear of a wedding!"

The excited Karashir was waving his arms in front of Issof, who stood with his face distorted with anger, making vain attempts to interrupt him. Finally he struck Karashir on the chest and cried out:

"Silence, impious one! How dare you to throw the Preor-

daigned to the dogs! I do not wish to speak with you of this! Listen to something else. Mirso-Hur has said that if Aziz-khon closes the road so that he cannot bring goods over it, we shall all go hungry. What shall we do then? Your grain will not last even until the sun reaches the knees. Mine will not last to the ankles. How can we manage without the merchant? Do you think you can make soup out of stones? Do you think you can feed your eight children on prickly weeds?"

Karashir immediately reacted at the mention of hunger. His anger disappeared and he took a step backwards, murmuring uncertainly:

"The caravan will come. . . ."

"Do you really believe that?" asked Issof viciously. "I do not believe it. And what is more, the anger of Aziz-khon is a dreadful anger. Why should we stir it up against us on account of that miserable whore? It is not me who says this. These are the words of the wise judge Nauruz-bek. We shall rouse the wrath of god and of Aziz-khon and of Bobo-Kalon and of the merchant for what good reason? For a worthless woman from another settlement. If our women follow her example they will begin turning their backs on their husbands and spitting in their faces. Give her back to Aziz-khon and put an end to it! Then we shall know no misfortune."

"That is right! Give her back!" cried the canyon-men crowding about Issof. "He speaks the truth!"

Karashir looked about helplessly.

"Shout as much as you please, but the Village Soviet will never permit such a thing," he said.

"The Village Soviet!" snorted Issof. "What do we care for your Village Soviet? What is the Village Soviet? Shon-Pir says the Village Soviet acts according to the decisions of the people. Can you not hear what the people have decided?"

"This is not the people. There are scarcely twenty here."

"Twenty? Very well. Let all the people come together! All of Siatang! We shall hold a large meeting and you will see what the people will decide!"

The sound of the wrangling could be heard at some distance, and other canyon-men came jumping over the stones

to the clearing to find out what it was all about. As soon as they arrived, they too began to take part in the argument.

People whom Nisso had never seen, of whose existence she was unaware were deciding her fate here among these dark, disordered masses of rocks. Clouds were gathering over the head of the unsuspecting girl, and this time the danger was greater than that presented by the jaws of Ashtar-i-Kalon.

In a narrow passageway between jagged rocks appeared Sho-Pir, and everyone became silent on catching sight of him.

"What is all the noise about, friends?" he asked, walking over to the clearing and glancing at the excited people.

No one said a word.

"Perhaps you do not want to tell me what you were arguing about. In that case I shall not ask you."

"We must hold a meeting!" at last burst out Issof as he bent over to sort his sheaves.

"A meeting? Why?"

"There are matters which must be settled."

"What matters?" asked Sho-Pir so quietly that he could scarcely be heard. But he was heard, though no one answered.

"What matters, Issof?" he repeated just as quietly.

"Various matters," muttered Issof, glancing sidewise at the dusty boots of the Russian.

"Speak, Karashir!"

"Yes, I shall. Your Nisso, Sho-Pir, is the wife of Aziz-khon. He demands her back. That is why we need to hold a meeting. We do not know what the people will decide."

Sho-Pir compressed his lips slightly. But he was careful to keep himself under control, for the canyon-men were sullenly following the expression of his face.

"Very well, let us hold a meeting. Only there will be no time for this until the wheat is threshed. We shall hold the meeting on the day when we celebrate the opening of the new canal."

Turning sharply, he left the clearing. The worst that he could have imagined had happened. But as he climbed home deep in thought and greatly incensed, he did not doubt for a moment that his cause would win out in the end. It would

be a stiff battle, requiring that every detail be well thought out. Fortunately he had been able to gain time. He thought he knew the source of the malicious gossip.

7

It took Baktior a long time to dig the clay he needed from among the stones. But at last both baskets were full, and he touched his donkey with the branch which served as a whip. Under the gutter of the old canal, some little flowers called "hasprokh" were springing up among the stones, watered by the drops leaking through the rotten boards. Baktior picked one of them and stuck it under his tubeteika, merrily singing one of those monotonous little songs which the canyon-men were wont to sing whenever nothing upset their carefree mood.

*Of the two of us, more restless the wind:
I am patient, but the wind is not—
It touches your hair and touches your fingers,
While I only wait and gaze on them.*

Baktior paid no attention to what he was singing: he was too busy watching to see that his donkey did not catch the baskets on some protruding rock. As he walked through the fortress he glanced at the blackened old tower. Bobo-Kalon was not to be seen; he was no doubt inside, and Baktior felt an urge to sing louder so that on hearing him the old man would envy the faqir who was feeling so lighthearted today.

"Of the two of us, more restless the wind," he repeated more loudly, then suddenly changed his song:

*The little goat is running.
But my gun is loaded well,
I get him in the liver.*

But perhaps the old man is not at home. Where could he be? Hm! What did it matter? Why should he think about an old man whose life was almost over? His own life, now, was just beginning. How pleasant it was to be alive with the sun so high up there in the sky! Even the donkey was merrily wagging its tail as it stepped out on its little hooves.

The stones smeared with clay would lay firmly one on top of another, and perhaps his wall would stand even longer than the walls of that ancient fortress. Baktior had a fine house, and with the addition it would be even better. Of course it would be better: within its walls could now be heard laughter—very merry laughter—light, joyful laughter.

I am patient, but the wind is not—

It touches your hair and touches your fingers. . . .

Baktior continued on his way singing his song while the flower in his tubeteika swayed back and forth, tickling his face and filling his nostrils with its fragrance. "Touches your hair and touches your fingers. . . ." Slowly the meaning of the words impressed themselves on his mind, and he kept repeating them over and over. He was pleased to discover that they had taken on a new meaning for him.

Below him lay the village. Over there among the rocks was a small round clearing. Two bulls kept moving round and round and many people had gathered. One of the bulls had a white throat and a white spot on its left flank. "I wonder whose bull that is," thought Baktior without interrupting his song. It did not matter. The threshing was going on as it should, and everything was going on as it should. A fresh breeze was also blowing as it should. It was a cheerful little breeze.

Baktior had no reason for going down to the clearing: he kept to the crest of the hills as he drove his donkey home. . . . He also had to make a bed for Nisso—a wide wooden bed like the Russians used, one that would fill half the room he was building of stones. Thanks to Sho-Pir, Baktior could now make such beds himself. "Of the two of us, more restless the wind. . . . While I only wait and gaze on them. . . ." Baktior mixed up the words as he sang with his mind on more important things.

He went past the garden surrounding his house, and the donkey stopped of its own accord alongside the stones heaped next to the porch. Now Baktior would work until nightfall digging a hole in the ground and mixing the clay with water. He found Gulriz sitting on the porch knitting, but where was Nisso? There was no sense looking around

for her; probably she was in the orchard and would soon come back.

Taking off his robe, Baktior unloaded the donkey and set to work.

Presently Nisso came out on the porch and Gulriz looked at her son to see what he would say. Nisso was in her new clothes with the red braids falling over her shoulders and the bright tubeteika embroidered in lotus flowers on her head. There was no denying that she looked very charming and completely grown-up. Nisso went over and stood by Gulriz without glancing at Baktior, but she was anxious for him to notice her.

When he raised his eyes, Baktior dropped his clay-caked hands in amazement, unable to comprehend just what it was that had transformed her. Then he rubbed his hands together to clean them and tossed away the bits of clay before coming slowly over to the porch and climbing up the steps that brought him to Nisso.

"Where did you get them?" he asked with undisguised admiration.

Nisso looked at him with a faint smile, but she did not answer.

"Tell me, Nisso. Why are you silent? Did you give them to her, Naná?"

"Where would I get such treasures, son?"

They both laughed, but why make a joke of it? Where had Nisso obtained those clothes?

"Where did you get them?" repeated Baktior, this time with a shade of alarm in his voice.

"Are they not pretty, Baktior?" teased Nisso. "You want to know where I got them? I shall tell you. A very nice man gave them to me."

"What do you mean, gave them to you? Who could have done that? Sho-Pir?"

"Do you think there is no one in Siatang but Sho-Pir?"

"Someone else?" Baktior's heart froze. "Who gave them to you? Tell me immediately!"

"A very nice man, I tell you!" insisted Nisso, continuing to smile.

Baktior came up close to her; his face was crimson and his eyes were hard and filled with alarm.

"Do not joke, Nisso. Who gave them to you? And did he give them to you for nothing?"

Gulriz watched her son anxiously. Nisso had never before seen anger in Baktior's eyes, and she smiled sadly on her lips. She answered him hesitatingly:

"Kendiry is his name. He came here. . . ."

"Did Kendiry give you those things?" Baktior was immediately seized with fury. "What can that mean, oh Protector? Why should Kendiry have done such a thing? How did you get to know him?"

"Why should I not know him? Is he a bad man?" Nisso was frightened by Baktior's look, and hastened to add, "It was not Kendiry who gave them to me but the merchant. I went to the merchant. He was very kind. . . ."

Quite beside himself with rage, Baktior grabbed Nisso by the shoulders and shouted into her face:

"The merchant. . . . New clothes. . . . Kendiry. . . . You went there. . . . Are you insane? . . . He is a dog! Take off these clothes! Take them off, I tell you!"

He shook the amazed Nisso until her tubeteika fell off, and he kept tearing at the neck of her tunic. Nisso cried out and tried to free herself, while Gulriz jumped up and put her hand on Baktior's shoulder.

"Stop, my son," she said. "Leave her alone. Have you lost your senses?"

At that moment they heard the deep voice of Sho-Pir calling Baktior.

Baktior immediately left Nisso, who sank down on the floor with her face hidden in her hands.

Sho-Pir was already up on the porch.

"What is going on here? Are you crazy, Baktior? What is the trouble?"

"He is mad," gasped Gulriz. "Oi-yo! For the first time in my life I am afraid of my son."

Unable to control his hands, Baktior stood tearing at his woolen girdle. He was ashamed of himself, but his anger had not yet subsided.

"There! See how pretty she is? Ask her where she got those clothes. Ask her where she was and with whom she spoke."

"Where she was and with whom she spoke," mocked Sho-Pir. "Maybe you consider yourself a Khan?"

Sho-Pir flushed darkly, and Baktior shrank before his gaze. Gulriz pretended to be knitting. From where she was sitting on the floor Nisso looked up at the men fearfully. Sho-Pir turned to her.

"Who gave you those clothes?" he asked in softened tones.

"Do not be angry, Sho-Pir," answered Nisso softly, a ray of hope lighting her large, distressed eyes. "Kendiry came here and took me to the merchant. The merchant gave them to me."

"The merchant? You say that you went with Kendiry to the merchant?"

Why did Sho-Pir look at her in that way? It would have been better if he had shouted at her like Baktior! Nisso said nothing. She would have told Sho-Pir the whole truth had she not wanted to surprise him with the gift of the stockings. If she told him about the clothes she would have to tell him about the wool, and that wool. . . .

Gulriz saw that the frown was deepening on Sho-Pir's face. Guessing his thoughts, she said:

"You are mistaken in your thoughts, Sho-Pir. I am teaching her how to knit. The merchant ordered a pair of stockings from her and gave her these clothes in payment."

"Naná!" said Nisso in a tone of rebuke. "I asked you not to tell."

"Keep quiet! What if you did!" shouted Gulriz. "Things are different now. See what they think? It is better that Sho-Pir know the truth."

"Why should the merchant suddenly need a pair of stockings?" asked Sho-Pir turning to the old woman, but Baktior did not give her an opportunity to answer:

"Have her take off those clothes and I shall throw them in the merchant's face!"

Sho-Pir took a better look at Nisso's clothes. There was no doubt that they became her, showing off her natural beauty to advantage. He felt sorry for the girl.

"No, Baktior, we shall not do that. To be sure the merchant gave her the clothes, and he did it for some reason I cannot guess. But let us assume it was like this: he is a merchant and he gave her these clothes because it is a merchant's job to sell his goods. The clothes have a value that

he wanted Nisso to pay for in services. But there is a different price on the wool and the clothes. I myself shall pay him for the clothes. Let her keep them. It is high time she had something decent to wear."

"How will you pay for them?"

"That is my business. But you must never again go to the village without us, Nisso."

"Of course not!" put in Baktior. "She must not go! She has no business going to the village!"

"Not for that reason, Baktior," interrupted Sho-Pir, adopting the bantering tone which was usual with him. "A fine representative of Soviet power you are, ready to lock Nisso up! There is another reason. . . ."

"What other, Sho-Pir?"

"The following: are you listening, Nisso? There are some people here who would like to return you to Aziz-khon."

Had Aziz-khon himself suddenly appeared on the porch, Nisso could scarcely have been more frightened. She became deathly pale.

"Do not become so frightened, foolish mouse," said Sho-Pir. "It is a good thing that we know. And do not become alarmed, for you will surely remain here in Siatang. But do not go anywhere without my permission. Get up, now. So you have brought the clay, Baktior? Pick up that tubeteika over there. You have smeared it all up with your dirty hands!"

8

It was one of those quiet evenings which occur only in the mountains, when the cooling gorges stand brimming with silence; when every rustle, every scraping of pebbles beneath the foot, every splash of water in the stream resounds throughout the valley, testifying to the majestic peace reigning there. Slowly the light of the moon takes possession of the world. Somewhere below can be heard the soft, sad strumming of a lute, while from another side comes the intermittent trilling of a pipe.

Baktior had long since climbed the ladder leading to his shelter, Nisso had retired to her room, and Sho-Pir was sitting on the porch hugging his knees and rocking slightly

back and forth as he talked to Gulriz, who was sitting up straight and severe on the rug before him.

Sho-Pir was telling Gulriz how women lived on the other side of the mountains, where people had done away with the Preordained for all time. For the present Sho-Pir said not a word about Nisso. As he spoke, the old woman listened in silence, her deep-set, intelligent eyes shining in the moonlight. The idea of having the women come to the meeting at which Nisso's fate was to be decided had seemed too bold even to Sho-Pir. But he rested his hopes in Gulriz, for only she could help him.

When Sho-Pir had finished, Gulriz continued to sit silent, engrossed in her own deep thoughts.

"Now Aziz-khon is demanding that we return our Nisso to him," remarked Sho-Pir suddenly, as though this had nothing to do with what he had been saying. "What do you think about that, Gulriz? Should we hand her over?"

"She is beautiful," said Gulriz. "He will not easily forget her."

"What shall we do if he does not forget her?"

Gulriz realized better than Sho-Pir that a person like Aziz-khon would stop at nothing. She knew better than Sho-Pir the former power of Aziz-khon. When Siatang had been ruled by the sayids and mirs, even Bobo-Kalon had feared him, in spite of the fact that the latter considered himself independent of Yakhbar. He had feared him more than the Russian vicegerent living with his soldiers in the fortress which was now called the Volost. Even if Siatang had been considered a holding of the Russian tsar, Aziz-khon was closer to Siatang and his word had always had weight, for the Russian soldiers had never come with their rifles to this place. . . . What weapon could Sho-Pir now use to combat Aziz-khon? There were many measures Aziz-khon could take, once he determined to have Nisso back at any cost.

"The hearts of our men are filled with fear," answered Gulriz.

"What are they afraid of?"

"Baktior is alone. You are alone. You are backed by only a few men, and they are like blades of grass which cannot withstand the wind. Our customs oppose you. And our

old men have great influence. And over the young ones too."

"Under Soviet power, questions are decided by a counting of hands."

"It will be a bad counting among our men. There are few of them who will go against the Preordained."

"Would you go against it?"

"I am a woman."

"Women may also raise their hands."

What had he said? Had she understood correctly? You would never hear such words from the men of Siatang, not if you lived ten life cycles! But that was what Sho-Pir had said and that was what he believed. See how intently he was looking at her and waiting—

"Such a thing has never been since the very birth of Ali," said Gulriz at last quietly.

"The Soviet form of government had also never been since the birth of Ali," said Sho-Pir seriously.

"Can my one hand help?"

"There are many women in the village. Baktior can make a count of them."

"He can," affirmed Gulriz in a low tone. "If there are indeed many of them . . . the heads of the women are all alike, but as for their hands—I do not know."

"If you would go to their homes and speak to them. . . ."

Gulriz placed her hand on her wrinkled brow and seemed to forget the presence of Sho-Pir, who sat listening to the distant trilling of a pipe.

"Well, Sho-Pir," she said at last in a firm voice, "I know you. When you get your heart set on something, there are no walls that can stop you. But I shall not go to their homes."

"You will not?" asked Sho-Pir in some alarm. "Then what shall we do?"

"I shall not go to their homes. Do not look at me like that. Perhaps I am foolish, but I have my own thoughts. There is a man in every home. I would come and speak to the woman one time, but he would say the opposite thing to her a hundred times; he would strike her and put the fear of devils into her. It seems to me we should do something different. We should speak to those who are away from their husbands. Now half our women are in the Upper Pas-

ture with the herds. You know the law of the Preordained that men dare not go up there. Even if a woman gives birth in that place, her husband cannot come to her. If he does, the women drive him away with stones. For they are the Wives of the Pasture. When will the meeting take place?"

"Naná!" cried Sho-Pir, jumping up in his excitement and calling her by this name for the first time. "You could not have thought of anything better! How wise you are! Go to the women. In three days the threshing will be finished. Then we shall work on the canal one day. On the fifth day we shall call the meeting. What do you think of that?"

"Good, Sho-Pir. On the fifth day. Sit down. This is what we shall do: tomorrow I shall go to the Upper Pasture and remain there. The summer grazing ends when the threshing is over. After the threshing, all the men go together to the Upper Pasture to bring back their wives and their cattle. They must bring back the blankets and utensils and the milk products accumulated during the summer. You tell them that first there will be the meeting, and then they will go to the pasture, while I shall tell the Wives of the Pasture that there is a new law saying they are to drive their cattle down to the village without the men. We shall arrive on the day of the meeting."

"What if the women are afraid?"

"If the women are afraid, then we must give Nisso back to Aziz-khon. I do not want that, Sho-Pir. If the women are afraid, then my son no longer has need of his foolish mother and it is time for me to die."

Catching herself before she spoke the whole truth, Gulriz placed her bony fingers on the neck of Sho-Pir and pulled his face down to hers, looking long and searchingly into his eyes.

Sho-Pir waited without comprehending the impulsive behaviour of the old woman.

"Ah, Sho-Pir," she said at last in a trembling voice, "I look into your eyes and I trust you. I think you must be a holy person. I can speak to you about what is on my mind: do you want Baktior to take Nisso for his wife?"

Sho-Pir had more than once thought of this very thing. Now he looked into Gulriz' shining eyes and replied without hesitation:

"Yes, Gulriz."

But having said it, he was immediately overwhelmed by his own loneliness. His heart was heavy, but he forced himself to be cheerful. Taking Gulriz' hand in his, he said eagerly:

"Yes, Naná, I want your son to be happy. Tomorrow morning you must go to the pasture."

Then he added softly,

"Now may I go to bed?"

"True enough, Sho-Pir, it is time to go to bed," said Gulriz affectionately, stroking his hair as though the large head of Sho-Pir were the head of her son.

Sho-Pir got up. During the last seven years of his life, no one had stroked his hair, and in a state of agitation he directed his steps toward the plane tree under which the strip of felt served him as a bed.

As he lay bathed in the moonlight filtering through the leaves, he recalled the dear and distant home which seven years before had ceased to exist. He recalled that dreadful day when he had driven a truck full of half-starved Red Army men to his home, only to find nothing but charred remains. Two hours earlier the postmaster in his little town had called him on the phone and had just managed to say, "Hurry! The basmachi have come!" when a shot was heard over the wire and the postmaster's voice broke off. Sho-Pir had raced his machine to the spot, but when he came in sight of the town he saw the horsemen galloping away. He was too late. Among the ruins of his house he found the charred bodies of two women, a child, and an old man. They had been his mother and father, his wife and his little daughter. All but his daughter had had their throats cut; the little girl's head had been crushed. After burying his dear ones, the young truck driver Alexander Medvedev had left the town forever to volunteer in the Red Army and fight the basmachi until they were wiped out.

Since then no one had caressed him. Although that was not entirely true. One day a hand had rested affectionately on his shoulder, but that had been a man's hand, roughened by long marches through the mountains. Could he ever forget the moment when his demobilized comrades had left for the North? It was evening in the deserted mountains. On every side the stony valley stretched to the slopes. His commander,

the stout, bewhiskered Vasili Terentieievich, led Medvedev into his yurt, telling the others to get out, and had sat Alexander down beside him for a heart-to-heart talk. "Stop your nonsense and come along with us," he had said, but Medvedev remained silent until he blurted out, "I cannot go! Don't be angry, Terentieievich!" Then for the first time he had told his commander all that had happened. The older man listened as he played with his faded moustache and patted Alexander on the shoulder. "I understand, lad," he said at last. "If you have no one to return to, do what you think best. The Commissar was right. I myself have become so used to these mountains that it is hard to part with them. . . . Well, find yourself a place to live here and let it be home to you. There are good people wherever you go, and perhaps you may prove to be as useful as you hope."

The squadron had ridden away in single file. The long rays of the setting sun lighted their faded uniforms as they gradually disappeared behind the ridges, and Medvedev had all he could do to keep from running after them, so heavy was his heart. But he was brought back to earth by the sight of the old native with the thin beard standing next to him with his hands crossed on his stomach, making no effort to restrain the tears rolling down his thin yellow cheeks. He was Mamat-Akhun, the guide who for a whole year had been roaming around with the squadron. He also had nowhere to go and had decided to become the driver of some camels the detachment had left behind with the nomads in one of the *auls*.^{*} When he saw him, Medvedev himself was ready to cry.

Many years had passed since then. His old life was forgotten. Even the name "Alexander Medvedev" seemed strange, as though it belonged to someone else. He could not imagine responding to it instead of the usual "Sho-Pir." But the caress of that rough male hand seemed to linger on his shoulder. . . .

And now the unexpected caress of this old woman!

"Terentieievich was right," thought Sho-Pir sadly, as he looked at the moon through the leaves. "There are good people here also, and perhaps I have indeed been of some use to them."

^{*} Aul—A mountain village.

But the bitter memories that Sho-Pir usually managed to drive away dominated his thoughts for long hours that night. He did not even resist them, but lay on his felt mattress recalling all his strange, difficult, lonely life. Without knowing why, he suddenly thought of Nisso. He thought of her for a long time with a feeling of affectionate responsibility which led him to figure out just what he should do in order to convince the canyon-men of her right to live in Siatang. His mind worked clearly, and once more he became the man whose influence over the lives of the canyon-men stemmed naturally from his plain and resolute intelligence, a man who knew what he wanted and could adapt circumstances to serve the achievement of his goal. When he had drawn the necessary conclusions and the moon had rolled behind the mountain peaks, leaving him alone with the familiar murmur of the stream, Sho-Pir turned on his side and went to sleep. But in the last moment of consciousness, the sound of Baktior's snoring inspired the thought: "Of course Baktior loves her."





CHAPTER SIX

I

ACCORDING to the Siatang calendar, the sun was resting on the knees of the Man, for the first cold winds of autumn came blowing through the canyon. The giant glaciers were making themselves felt. The nights were frosty, and for that reason the faqirs woke up earlier than usual in their draughty huts. As soon as they awoke they remembered that the grain had already been harvested and so they need not hurry. As they shivered in their ragged robes and sheepskins, they amused themselves by imagining how pleasant it would be to build a fire on the hearth and squat in front of it until they had absorbed enough heat to last the entire day. But winter was still a long distance away, and only a foolish, thriftless person would touch the supply of twigs stored up for the winter's fuel. Oh no, it would be much better to huddle under the rags until the sun had risen high enough to temper the cold blowing down from the glaciers.

Only Baktior and Sho-Pir rose as early as usual that morning. The canal had been finished the night before. It had been cleared of stones throughout its entire length, from the fortress to the wastelands below, the only thing obstructing the course of the water was a large boulder at the head of the canal which Sho-Pir had decided to remove on the day when they would celebrate the opening. All Siatang was talking about the Soviet holiday, the water, the new farmlands, and the meeting which was to be held on that day.

On their way to the wastelands to measure off and assign the new plots of land, Sho-Pir and Baktior stepped in to see Issof and Karashir. They woke them both up and took them along with them. The wind blew in an uninterrupted stream; it seemed incomprehensible that there could have accumu-

lated such a solid, pressing mass of air. The rocks of the wastelands sang in high, wailing tones as the wind rushed through the crevices. The words which Sho-Pir spoke were carried down into the valley almost without being heard by his companions. Karashir hunched his shoulders and shrank inside his tattered sheepskin; Issof kept adjusting his wind-torn beard; Baktior raised the collar of his robe, while only Sho-Pir stepped ahead lightly and freely as though no wind in the world could penetrate his close-fitting army shirt. Sho-Pir loved the wind and always became cheerful in such weather.

There was not a cloud in the sky, which seemed more delicate in tint than usual. Its transparency was the more remarkable in the face of this racing solidity of air which it seemed should have been seen as well as felt and heard. A line of cliffs ending not far from Karashir's hut separated the village from the wastelands which formed the narrow lower end of the valley and were strewn with small stones to the very bank of the river. In the passageway between the cliffs and the precipitous bank of the river stood the shop of Mirso-Hur. Past it ran a path leading from the village through the wastelands to a cliff, beyond which lay the deserted canyon. It was not for nothing that the merchant had chosen this site for his shop: not a single person climbing up from the Great River could escape his observation.

The new canal traversed the entire length of the village and entered the wastelands between the merchant's shop and the line of cliffs. Here it fanned out into a dozen small ditches, each of which irrigated one or two plots. The sides of these ditches were lined with stones reinforced here and there by branches and clay which had been brought from the fortress.

As they walked along these still waterless ditches, Sho-Pir and his companions made little mounds of stones on each plot. Sho-Pir sought out flat surfaces on which he scratched pictures of animals and insects familiar to the natives of Siatang. Karashir and Issof were filled with curiosity as they watched him drawing.

"Why are you doing that?" asked Karashir, when Sho-Pir drew a scorpion on the first mound.

Sho-Pir evaded the question with a joking reply while

he drew a fish on the second mound, a snake on the third, and a goat on the fourth.

Karashir and Issof continued working, convinced that Sho-Pir was observing a ritual which they did not understand. But when Karashir saw a complicated drawing of a dragon on one of the mounds, he shook his head doubtfully and said, "What is going to happen?" Sho-Pir answered in Russian, "A drawing of lots." Then he laughed and explained that on the day of the opening the canyon-men would take their chances on drawing stones containing similar pictures.

"If you draw a snake, you will get the plot with the snake on it. If you draw a fish, the fish plot will be yours."

Karashir said that Sho-Pir had thought up a fair means and a wise one, but he was disappointed that Sho-Pir's drawings held no sacred or mystic significance.

Issof and Karashir dropped behind Sho-Pir and walked silently along the ditches, building new mounds of stones. At last Karashir came up and said to Sho-Pir:

"Will it be a big celebration?"

"Of course it will. How could it be otherwise when poor people like you will at last receive farmland for your own use?"

"Very good. It will be a big holiday," said Karashir dreamily. "We shall kill sheep and make *plov** and bake a whole mountain of cakes. We shall eat all day long! My belly will swell up like this!" and Karashir indicated the size of his belly. Then, poking his finger into Issof's ribs he added with a chuckle, "He has such thin skin on his belly that it will probably burst! Will there be musicians too, Sho-Pir?"

"I can see that you have been a guest at the Khan's celebrations. Did you eat a lot of meat there?"

"I myself was not there, Sho-Pir. The sayids feasted, but I am a faqir. The faqirs just stood on the outside and looked on. There was lots of meat—ee-yo! They must have slain forty sheep! This time all the faqirs will take part in the celebration. We must also have sheep, maybe not forty, but at least ten. When you come to think of it, perhaps we shall need twenty. Where shall we ever get so many?"

* An oriental dish made of rice and mutton.

"At that other celebration where did the sayids get their sheep?"

"They killed their own," answered Karashir quickly, but then stopped short. "No, they were not their own. They took them from us, from the faqirs. My newborn lamb also went to make their plov."

"Fine," said Sho-Pir. "We shall take them from you for our holiday too."

"Ho," said Karashir, screwing up his eyes shrewdly. "I have no sheep."

"Really? Then you shall get nothing to eat!" put in Baktior, who had been listening quietly.

"What do you mean? Shall I go hungry while everyone else feasts?"

"What makes you think everyone else will feast?" asked Sho-Pir. "Where will the others get their sheep? Or do you expect them to kill the only ones they own?"

Karashir was slow in comprehending:

"Then what shall we do?"

"We shall manage without the feast."

"A holiday without food?" said Karashir in disappointment. "In other words, we shall get nothing, just as we did under the Khan?"

"Who is expected to give it to you?"

"Whoever holds the celebration. The ruler."

"Who is the ruler? You yourselves are the rulers now. You seem to think that Baktior and I have a hundred sheep that we could make you a present of."

Karashir became silent. Once more his lowered eyes saw nothing but stones.

"Will there not even be musicians?" he finally faltered.

"It will be a very dull celebration," said Issof, turning his back on Sho-Pir and studying the snow peaks.

"Will it be so very dull to find water flowing through your farmland?" asked Sho-Pir dryly as he placed a drawing on the next mound of stones.

No one said a word. Even Baktior had become thoughtful. Until now he had not given this a thought, but it seemed to him also that it would be pleasant if. . . . But no, he entirely agreed with Sho-Pir.

Without a word they continued piling up mounds of

stones and removing the debris that had accumulated in the ditches. Karashir remained alone near the mound marked with a fish. He kept walking along the ditch calculating the slope of the land and imagining how the water would flow over it. He measured it with his steps and made note of the stones which would have to be removed before sowing. He seemed to have forgotten that he had come here to help in the general work.

"What are you doing over there, Karashir?" called out Sho-Pir. "Come here! We have to place the last pile of stones!"

Karashir came over slowly.

"Sho-Pir. . . ."

"What is it?"

"That plot over there—the one with the fish on it—can I have it?"

"Why should you?" put in Issof quickly. "Give it to me!"

"No, to me!" said Karashir hotly.

Sho-Pir interrupted with an impatient gesture.

"What are you arguing about? I told you we would draw lots."

"Let me draw the fish."

"Why him? Is he any better than I am?"

Sho-Pir laughed.

"Go on home now. We have finished our work."

Karashir and Issof went away muttering sullenly as the wind tore at their clothes. Baktior turned to Sho-Pir.

"What they say is true, Sho-Pir. What kind of a celebration will it be without any food?"

"I agree with you, Baktior, but what can we do? Next year things will be different, but for the present. . . . If only the caravan would arrive today or tomorrow! Then we could bake cakes of the flour; I would even show them how to make a Russian cake. You probably have never tasted one. But I am worried about the caravan. It has been so long since we have had any news of it that I begin to wonder if anything could have happened. Things look bad."

"Very bad, Sho-Pir. Shall we go home now?"

"I suppose so."

According to Sho-Pir's calculations, the time had long since passed when the caravan should have arrived at the Volost located at the head of the Great River.

This settlement was a ten days' journey along the Great River, or a seven days' journey over the perilous Zarkhok Pass and through the gorge into which it led.

Sho-Pir knew that as soon as the caravan arrived at the Volost they would dispatch a messenger to tell the canyon-men how many donkeys would be needed for hauling the goods to Siatang. Sho-Pir expected this messenger every day, but no news came from the caravan.

Confident that it would eventually arrive, Sho-Pir had promised to pay the men who had built the canal in flour. On this basis many of them had neglected their own affairs in order to work on the canal. Instead of setting their traps in the mountains, gathering edible herbs, sowing the patuk which, while yielding a good harvest and requiring little care, was nevertheless harmful to the health, they had spent half the summer removing stones and boulders and laying the bed of the new canal. Even those who had sown their plots could not ensure their families even a meagre existence without hunting, putting by a store of herbs and going in debt to the merchant.

Sho-Pir had placed all his hopes in the caravan. The letter which Hudodod had brought from the Volost stated that the caravan had set out from its base in the spring, which meant it was high time it arrived. Yet there were many things which might have happened on the way. During his roving with the Red Army squadron, Sho-Pir had become well acquainted with the High Mountains, and for that reason had a good idea of the route which the caravan would travel. The high passes and deserted valleys extended along the restless eastern border. It was easily conceivable that a band of basmachi, learning of the first caravan of Soviet goods to risk the journey to this little-known Soviet frontier, might have attacked it. . . .

Now as he walked alongside the silent Baktior, Sho-Pir tried to convince himself that the caravan must be strongly guarded, and therefore safe from attack. In view of its almost certain arrival, he must somehow convince the canyon-men not to grind their grain, otherwise there would be nothing to sow in the spring.

"This is what I have decided, Baktior," said Sho-Pir. "The canyon-men must pass a resolution prohibiting the

grinding of the grain. Do you suppose that they all understand why the crop was bad this year?"

"Of course they understand: too little water from the old canal; the winter landslides which damaged the gutters; the lack of rain and the fact that they sowed so little because, as you remember, half the people got their grain on credit from the merchant."

"Yes, those are the main things—lack of water and the merchant. The people may be aware of the first, but the second?"

"Sho-Pir!" They were surprised to hear Nisso's clear voice calling, for neither Baktior nor Sho-Pir had noticed that they were already in their own orchard.

Nisso ran toward them through the trees.

"Come see what I have done! It is finished already!"

"What is finished?" asked Sho-Pir, looking uncomprehendingly at her hands, stained a bright red to the elbow.

"I have dyed it! Come see! Over here!" Nisso took Sho-Pir's sleeve between two fingers and pulled him after her. Baktior followed, slightly offended that as usual Nisso had addressed Sho-Pir.

Near the dinner table which stood under the plane tree, a dripping red sheet was hanging between the trunks of two trees. A large iron pot stood on three smoke-blackened stones under the tree, and this pot was filled to the brim with cooling red dye.

The sheet was an old army one belonging to Sho-Pir. He had been preserving it for sentimental reasons, but that morning he had ripped it up to make two red flags.

He had helped Nisso prepare the dye by boiling up some of the herbs called "sadbarg," which Gulriz used for dying her wools. But the actual dying of the flags had been done by Nisso, and she had made a very good job of it.

The night before Sho-Pir had explained to Nisso what a flag was and why it should wave above the new canal. He also told her about the revolution and who Lenin had been and that now the happiness of all honest working people was being defended by Stalin, whom they looked upon as a father. Nisso listened attentively and repeated the great names in a whisper, with the feeling that she was being initiated into

a wonderful, sacred mystery, and she strove to remember every word which Sho-Pir pronounced.

More and more frequently of late Nisso had attempted to imagine the immensity of the world beyond the mountains. On those nights when, after listening to the tales of Sho-Pir, she lay looking up at the starry sky, unable to fall asleep, her imagination would swarm with the most fantastic images. The closer his wonderful tales brought her to the unknown, the more anxious she became to fathom it, to learn about all those things of which until the present she had never even dreamed.

When Sho-Pir told her that red was the colour of freedom and happiness, she believed it unquestioningly and concluded that the flag over the canal would be a talisman bringing happiness to Siatang. All day long as she dyed the flags, she had been thinking that once she was working to make this talisman, was touching it and would be the first to hold it in her hands, she herself would be sure to enjoy the blessings of freedom and happiness. That was why she had met Sho-Pir so joyfully and was so eager to hear him say that she had done everything exactly right. She stood watching him with shining eyes as he examined the sheet hanging between the trees. Sho-Pir was pleased.

"Splendid," he said, and then added, "You have done it well. Where is the other one?"

"Here," said Nisso triumphantly, going over to the iron pot and sticking her hands into the red liquid to pull out the second half of the sheet, a corner of which she handed to Sho-Pir.

"Hold on! Hold on tight!" she cried imperiously as the corner nearly slipped out of his fingers. "Here, stretch it out. Lift it up higher. Let the water run off or it will leave a spot."

Sho-Pir obediently did as she said, and soon the second red banner hung between the mulberry trees.

"There!" said Nisso, proud of her work. "Where shall that one wave?"

"Over the new land plots. Look, Baktior, can our celebration be dull with banners like these? I have been longing for the sight of a red flag again. Look! As bright as a flame!" Then, as though suddenly perceiving the great truth symbolized by this bit of cloth, he said with inspiration, "Why, you and I are making a revolution, Baktior!"

Baktior was looking at Sho-Pir, rather than at the flag. At that moment the latter's candid face expressed such pure joy that Baktior could not help smiling, though he did not know why. But Sho-Pir suddenly said with intentional gruffness, as though realizing that he had allowed his friend to glimpse into his innermost soul.

"But of course Nisso has forgotten to get us any supper."

"Oh, but you are wrong," retorted Nisso with injured pride.

"Pea porridge again, I suppose. How sick of it I am! But bring it on; we are hungry. First go scrub your hands."

Nisso went reluctantly; the unexpected harshness of Sho-Pir's tone had offended her.

"That is my opinion," said Sho-Pir, turning to Baktior. "Lack of water and the merchant are the main causes. We have solved the water problem, but as to the merchant—. We must arrange to be independent of the merchant next year. No one must be allowed to grind his grain; we must wait for the caravan. When it comes we shall distribute the flour it brings and people can bake as many cakes as they like. But not until then."

"How can we prevent them, Sho-Pir?"

"The best way would be to collect the grain and keep it under lock and key. But we could do that only if people understood and brought it to us of their own free will."

"They will never do that, Sho-Pir. No one will bring it. The old men will tell them that we are trying to take their grain from them. They will not understand."

"You think not? You are probably right. Then the only thing to do is to let them keep it, but promise not to grind it before the arrival of the caravan."

"If we let them keep it, they may promise."

"You speak to those you are friendly with as soon as possible; we shall make an announcement at the meeting and try to convince everyone. Look, Nisso is bringing our supper. She is a clever girl—manages everything beautifully without the help of Gulriz."

Nisso was holding a steaming little iron pot in her outstretched hands as she came, stepping carefully over the grass, her eyes on the ground. Sho-Pir quickly went up to her and took the pot out of her hands.

For two days the wind had been blowing unceasingly, whirling up the dust which had accumulated near the stone walls in the course of the summer, tearing leaves and fruit off the trees, carrying away bits of straw snatched from the stacks weighted down with stones on the roofs for drying. It suddenly died down on the eve of the opening of the canal. Quiet descended on Siatang, which lay bathed in the light of a green-yellow moon. In the morning the air was particularly pure, as though it had been washed.

Mirso-Hur issued from his shop with his bare feet thrust into slippers and a long Yakhbarian robe thrown over his shoulders. He leaned against the sun-warmed wall and stood looking for a long time at the mountains, at the awakening village, and the white mane of the river coursing past his shop. Kendiry, in full white trousers and a pongee shirt, was arranging the awning over his barber shop, for he was expecting business that day.

When he had made it fast, he came and leaned against the wall next to Mirso-Hur, lazily whetting an iron razor as long and curved as a butcher's knife. Mirso-Hur knocked his tobacco case against his palm to shake out a bit of the coarse green weed which he placed beneath his tongue before offering the case to the barber. Kendiry rejected it with a shake of his head, looking at the merchant with an expressionless face bearing the semblance of a frozen smile. It seemed to Mirso-Hur that the contemptuous eyes of Kendiry were asking him something. Mirso-Hur said nothing, however, as he hung his tobacco case back on his belt and drew his robe together, thinking the while that after all Kendiry was not the least interested in his misfortune. Many times that night the merchant had awakened and lain there obsessed by the thought that he could count on no profits from this holiday. But the only person with whom Mirso-Hur could share his misgivings was Kendiry. So he spat out the green tobacco juice and pressed his tongue against the bloated weed as he pronounced inarticulately:

"They call this a holiday?"

"So they do," said Kendiry.

The merchant placed his hands behind his back and began picking at the clay crumbling off the wall.

"When the Khan used to celebrate holidays, he would gladden the hearts of the merchants like the blessing of the Protector. But this holiday is like the wind from the glaciers—cold and empty. Not a yard of material shall I sell, not a tubeteikaful of flour or berries, not a pinch of salt. Nothing. I cannot live here any longer, Kendiry! I shall go away. I shall go away forever. To Yakhbar or Garmite, or even further. Wherever my donkey takes me—it makes no difference. Better to live in the desert. I am a fool to go on vegetating here, listening to you. Why should I?"

"Be quiet! You know very well why," replied Kendiry dryly, squinting at the shining edge of his razor.

"What do you mean, 'be quiet,' Kendiry? Why should I keep on waiting for what in all probability will never happen? There are very few true believers in this world; why should I go on living among infidels? Why have I taken your advice for so long? It is wise to spend a coin that brings you ten in return; to spend a hundred that bring you a thousand. But I go on spending and spending, without getting anything in return except your promises."

"You cannot see everything, Mirso. The wild boar has little eyes fixed on the ground. They do not see the heaven. You are a man, and a very highly esteemed man. What are your eyes for?"

"I cannot see the end, but I can see my ruin. I cannot see any profitable business here. You wish to help me, Kendiry, and I am grateful to you for that, but still you are nothing more than a barber!"

"Without a barber the beard of the Prophet would have gone uncared for," observed Kendiry dispassionately. "Give it time and it will grow."

"I shall die before it grows. Even a wild goat grazing among the rocks must chew its daily portion of grass."

"You have your grass."

"What grass? Are you referring to the girl? Can you tell me whether Aziz-khon is only wrathful against her or whether he still loves her?"

"Why should you want to know that?"

"Ho! You ask me why? For his wrath he will pay no

more than forty coins: it would be foolish even to ask for more. For his love he will pay a hundred and even two hundred if we say the proper words. What did you say to him?"

Kendiry was tired of Mirso-Hur's complaints.

"Would you really like to know? Very well then, I shall tell you. I said nothing to him."

"Did you not visit Aziz-khon?" said the merchant waving his hands frantically. "You told me that you did."

"I went to his country. Nisso ran away from him. Was that not enough for me to find out?"

"I do not understand you, Kendiry. Why did you not speak to him?"

"If I spoke, I would promise. If I promised I would have to fulfil it. But the girl is still here."

Mirso-Hur realized that Kendiry was becoming annoyed, he always spoke in jerks when he became annoyed. But Mirso-Hur was eager to learn everything.

"Here today and there tomorrow. What do you think will happen? Today the meeting is to be held. The faithful have been to speak with me and I too went to speak with them. We are of one mind: the girl must be driven out of here. They will say what they think and so will I. If you speak they will listen to you. There are people who know that the mountains stand behind your words. Will you speak?"

Kendiry listened with knitted brows. Even the habitual smile had disappeared from his lowering face. He was slow in answering, as though trying the merchant's patience.

"Maybe I will," he said at last, adding with annoyance, "but enough of this, Mirso. Look, some people are coming. As for me—" Kendiry gave a little laugh. "The barber must also make some money. You do not wish to trust me any longer? You wish to go away from here? Go ahead! But from whom will you collect your debts if you go?"

"From whom will I collect them if I remain?"

"You will collect them a hundred times over, Mirso. When the camel makes a long journey through the desert it drinks nothing for seven days. But if you lack the patience, go ahead."

Kendiry left the worried merchant. Going over to the awning, the barber stood flourishing his razor and smiling

at two haughty old men who were approaching. The merchant bit his lips and slowly entered the shop.

The only equipment in the barber shop was a large wooden bowl filled with cloudy river water and a many-edged brown stone on which the customers sat with their legs tucked up under them. One of the two old men who now entered had a goiter and a matted beard. After muttering the usual greetings, he sat down on the stone and fell silent. The other old man squatted with his back to the wall and his face in the sun, from which he shielded his trachoma-inflamed eyes with his hand as he dozed off.

Kendiry began scraping the first man's face. He had neither soap nor towel nor any of the other accessories ordinarily used in shaving. He hacked noisily at the old man's coarse beard, while the latter gritted his teeth and sat stoically until the operation was over.

It would be wrong to think that this was the only technique of shaving that Kendiry knew. When he shaved himself in solitude, he used a little razor from Singapore and soaped his long, thin cheeks with a brush. As he looked into the mirror he thought that however ugly he was, it was inadvisable to go about even among the people of Siatang with his face further disfigured by a sprouting beard. Any other wandering barber within the limits of the High Mountains would have used the same methods in shaving the people of Siatang. And now whenever his razor became the least dulled by the old man's coarse beard, Kendiry would throw back his left sleeve, spit on his palms, and hone his razor as though his hand were the best whetstone in the world.

"Are you coming to the meeting, Nauruz-bek?" Kendiry asked his silent customer in an offhand manner.

"This day will pass me by. What should I do at a meeting?"

"I know that you have no farm-plot and the water of the canal is not for you," said Kendiry. "But you come just the same. The Russian will have much to say."

"It does not concern me."

"Perhaps he will speak against you. When wolves attack a herd, the shepherds should not run away."

"Shepherds do not have teeth like mine. The old judge

no longer passes judgment. The Village Soviet passes judgment. I am no longer a shepherd. I am a sheep."

"The old judge may yet put in a just word. Are you not of the opinion that Bobo-Kalon should also receive a plot of land?"

"Bobo-Kalon is poorer than anyone else these days," said Nauruz-bek softly, bending his head to expose his wrinkled neck to the razor. "But there is no justice. They will not give him anything."

"How do you know?"

"There are faqirs who are of the same opinion. Not long ago Issof expressed it openly; we tried speaking through him. Bobo-Kalon himself heard Baktior call him a dog."

"Hm-m-m," said Kendiry, beginning to shave the old man's head. "But you come anyhow. First speak to Bobo-Kalon. Other matters will also be discussed. It is necessary that everyone be present."

"If it is necessary, I shall come," agreed Nauruz-bek, once more falling silent.

As he struggled with the old man's matted beard, Kendiry kept his eye on the wastelands stretching from the shop to the cliffs marking the lower end of the Siatang Valley. For some time he had been observing several canyon-men who were walking about there examining the lots indicated by the mounds of stones. Apparently they were conjecturing as to who would receive which lot. Among them Kendiry recognized Issof and Karashir. They were having a heated argument, in the course of which they gesticulated angrily, leaned over the ditches and kicked the stones out of their way.

Kendiry knew what they were arguing about, and he also knew how futile it was. But it pleased him to see that feelings were running high in Siatang. He waited impatiently until these men should approach his barber shop.

When Kendiry had finished shaving Nauruz-bek and begun working on his second client, the former judge entered the merchant's shop. Kendiry was certain that the muffled conversation which ensued was about Nisso.

As he shaved, the barber was weighing every word he intended to speak at the meeting. The success of the plan he had conceived depended largely on the effect of these

words. His plan was like a chessboard on which each of the canyon-men sooner or later would move according to his desire. He could allow no slips in the clever and complicated game he was playing, and therefore he was considering every detail with the greatest care.

By the time he had finished the hasty shaving of the second old man, Karashir and Issof were so close that he could speak to them without raising his voice.

"Come here, Karashir," he said. "Do you need a shave?"

"No," answered Karashir proudly, as he came up to the barber.

"Why not have a shave? Today is a holiday. It will be such a pleasure to make you handsome that I shall not take any money for it. Sit down. And you too, Issof; wait your turn." With a short laugh Kendiry added, "A free shave to everyone who receives land today!"

"Who would be fool enough to refuse something for nothing?" thought Karashir as he took a seat on the stone with his legs crossed under him. At every touch of the razor on his neck he screwed up his face with pain. Issof sat down on the ground silently, his thoughts still occupied with the argument which he hesitated to renew in the presence of Kendiry.

"I should like to know one thing, Karashir," said Kendiry. "Do you intend hauling the stones off the new land on your back?"

"Why should I haul them on my back when I have a donkey for that purpose?"

"What if Mirso-Hur takes away your donkey to settle your debts?"

Karashir drew back, pushing away the barber's hand and staring into the face bending over him.

"Why should he take it away?"

"What else could he take from you?"

Karashir waved his hand reassuringly.

"Next year I shall be rich. I shall sow a lot of wheat and pay him in flour."

"Next year!" laughed Kendiry sarcastically, his razor suspended over Karashir's head. "Will you need nothing else from the merchant this year?"

"No!" said Karashir, turning his back on Kendiry. "I shall spit in the merchant's face from now on."

"Go ahead and spit," said Kendiry, bearing down on the edge of the razor. "Meantime, I have heard that the merchant intends to demand payment from all those who spit on him."

"That is impossible," said Karashir stubbornly, but he fell silent. In very truth, what would he do if the merchant should demand payment all at once? Mirso-Hur would be taking revenge for the words Karashir had hurled in his face the last time they had met. In such a case, he would probably take not only his donkey, but his goat, and his two remaining chickens, and. . . . As he began to figure the amount of his debt, Karashir became oblivious even of the pain the barber was inflicting on him. Probably it had been a mistake to quarrel with the merchant; at any rate, he had better avoid further unpleasantnesses.

"Refuse to give him anything," whispered Kendiry into the very ear of Karashir.

"What?" exclaimed Karashir, turning so suddenly that the barber scarcely managed to remove his razor to a safe distance.

"That is what. Do you mean to say that Sho-Pir has not already given you such advice?"

"Sho-Pir? No indeed. How could he?"

"When he does, remember my words," said Kendiry in the same whisper. Suddenly he spoke up in a loud voice, "Well, now you are handsome enough to be getting along. Sit down, Issof; I shall make you just as handsome."

But at this moment they heard the distant jingle of a tambourine which had been agreed upon as the signal by which Baktior would summon the canyon-men to the head of the canal to celebrate its opening. Karashir hurried off without waiting for Issof and forgetting even to thank Kendiry.

In response to the insistent summons of the tambourine, the canyon-men poured out of the houses and orchards of the village onto the path leading to the fortress.

Above the crumbling wall of the fortress waved the red flag in a steady stream of wind which had begun to blow again as though it had stopped only to catch its breath.

All morning Nisso, who had remained at home alone, kept looking into the distance to see when the flag would appear. Nisso had been eager to go to the canal, but Sho-Pir had told her to remain at home until Baktior came for her, or until Gulriz returned from the Upper Pasture. For the first time in her life Nisso had missed people, and she could not understand this new feeling of loneliness. She wanted to run to the fortress and see how the water would flow through the new canal; she wanted to be with Sho-Pir; she could scarcely force herself to sit there on the familiar porch from which she had a view of the village and the river and the fortress and the wastelands which so recently had become furrowed by small ditches. But Nisso was only too well aware of the fact that today her fate was to be decided, that today the canyon-men would have a long discussion about her and that Sho-Pir himself was worried about the outcome of this discussion. Whenever she was struck by the realization that the canyon-men might actually send her back to Aziz-khon, she was overcome by a feeling of helplessness, like that of a cornered animal. Sho-Pir assured her that such a thing could not happen, but after all he was not a god. He was alone and there were many of those people. Perhaps they would turn out to be stronger than he was. For the last few days Nisso had lived under the threat of an evil fate; and as she watched Sho-Pir and Baktior, she realized that they too were filled with alarm. Sho-Pir had ceased teasing her of late and had become particularly gentle. Nisso realized that he thought about her more often than he would have her know.

From her post on the porch Nisso had spent the morning keeping watch over the valley below; she had heard the summons of the drum and seen the people cross the village. Even before they reached the fortress they were greeted by the red flag hoisted above the ancient wall. "My soul is in that flag," thought Nisso, and could scarcely keep herself from running to the canal. The people entered the crumbling gates of the fortress, crossed the yard and continued further up the pass until the mountain hid them from sight.

Above the fortress wall waved the red flag in a steady stream of wind. . . .

The canyon-men who had gathered on the narrow, stony

bank of the Siatang River where the canal began, looked at this flag and at the dry bed of the canal and at the boulder blocking the canal bed at the very edge of the precipice above the river, and at Sho-Pir and at Baktior. Everyone waited to see what would happen next, and for some reason they spoke in lowered tones.

Sho-Pir was sitting on the edge of the canal and also speaking very quietly with Baktior, who was sitting with his lute lying on his knees, absent-mindedly plucking at one of the strings which gave off a single high, thin tone.

All the canyon-men, both old and young, were wearing grey and black and brown robes and rawhide slippers pulled on feet that were either bare or encased in bright-coloured stockings. They were sitting and lying on the rocks along the canal bed or on the boulders heaped above the river.

Only Bobo-Kalon was not to be found among those who had gathered here; since early morning he had not emerged from his tower, and it was obvious that he did not wish to be seen by the people passing through the fortress. The merchant and Kendiry had not come either. There was not a single woman among the crowd, but Sho-Pir kept glancing in the direction of the upper gorge in the hope of seeing Gulriz appear accompanied by the Wives of the Pasture. But the path remained empty. Already four days had passed since Gulriz had gone to the Upper Pasture, and Sho-Pir was unaware of what had transpired there. He admitted to himself that if the efforts of Gulriz were unsuccessful he would have to take Nisso to the Volost and leave her there, for he could not vouch for what might happen to her here in the village. How could he succeed in getting the desired decision respecting Nisso? Of late he had thought only of the speech which he would make at the meeting; racking his brains for arguments to convince the canyon-men that Nisso should remain here.

When all the canyon-men had gathered, Sho-Pir opened the meeting without any formalities:

"We shall release the water now," he said, addressing them in a low voice. Then he stepped around the boulder blocking the canal and made a sign to the canyon-men who were to remove it.

"Time to get rid of it, comrades! As for you, Hudodod, go

to the head of the canal and listen. When I shake the tambourine three times, release the water."

Some twenty men thrust their pickaxes and crowbars under the boulder, straining and struggling in their effort to remove it. Sho-Pir also took up a pickaxe in the hope that action would drive away his disturbing thoughts:

"All together, all together! Lift her up!"

With a shrill scraping, the boulder turned over. The canyon-men quickly jumped back as the massive rock rolled heavily down the incline, crushing smaller rocks in its path, smashing an overhanging ledge on the cliff and finally crashing into the waters of the Siatang. Sho-Pir struck the tambourine three times. With several blows of his crowbar, Hudodod knocked the centre out of the pile of stones reinforced with brushwood which served as a dam. The rushing water quickly finished the job for him, pouring freely into the bed of the canal. As it branched away from the main stream flowing at a steep incline, the water grew more calm. It quickly filled the crater left by the excavated boulder and continued toward the fortress, completely flooding the canal bed. The crowd of canyon-men became speechless as they watched its impetuous flow. Suddenly Karashir jumped up and with the cry of "Ee-yo! Ali!" began to race along the bank. As though lashed by this cry, all those who had been standing and watching the water now rushed after Karashir with similar cries of joy.

"Water! Water! Water!" shouted Karashir like a madman as he tore across the fortress grounds and onto the path leading to the village, trying to catch up with the stream; behind him came the noisy canyon-men.

Infected by the general excitement, Baktior hugged his lute under his arm and was about to join the rush when he glanced at Sho-Pir. Left to himself, the latter was walking unhurriedly along the canal with a smile on his face. Baktior immediately took himself in hand and pointed to the others with a smile, as though he himself had never even dreamed of running off with them.

"Just look at them, Sho-Pir!" he said. "Jumping like a herd of goats!"

"Even those who until this moment had nothing but sarcastic remarks to make about the canal!" replied Sho-Pir.

Sparks flashed from his blue eyes and a slow flush crept beneath his wholesome coat of tan. "Come along with me. We have done a good job, Baktior!"

The water slid through the village like a brown snake. The canyon-men leaped over the fences, taking short-cuts through orchards and by-ways in order to hasten to the wastelands beyond the village. The women climbed up on the flat roofs where they stood shouting and beating their tambourines while their skirts flapped in the strong wind. The children jumped and hopped in glee, getting into the way of their elders, throwing pebbles into the water and filling the whole settlement with their joyful cries.

The water rushed past the merchant's shop. Mirso-Hur and Kendiry were standing under the awning of the barber shop silently watching the canyon-men. As soon as the water passed the shop it branched out into the narrow ditches which framed the lots. The old men in the crowd, worn out by their run and ashamed of their unseemingly burst of enthusiasm, now fell behind the young people, striving to resume an air of dignity in spite of their breathlessness.

The very last person to come was Sho-Pir, who walked slowly and without speaking to Baktior, who accompanied him. By the time Sho-Pir reached the wastelands the water was already flowing through all the ditches, and the canyon-men, somewhat quieted by now, were walking up and down over the stony ground arguing as to who should receive which lot. Sho-Pir climbed up on a large rock.

"It is time to open the meeting, Baktior!"

"The meeting! The meeting!" cried Baktior, waving his arms about. "We shall hold the meeting here! Call all the women and take your places."

On the previous evening Baktior had canvassed the homes in Siatang to tell the canyon-men to bring their wives to the meeting. None of them had objected, but now as Baktior took his place alongside of Sho-Pir behind the slab of granite serving as a table, he saw that only men were present. He was not in the least surprised. It was foolish of Sho-Pir to imagine that the women would come; there was not one to be seen. Those who had stood beating their tambourines on the roofs had again disappeared inside the houses. None of the men would allow their wives to attend a meeting.

Yet now he caught sight of a lone woman making her way along the ridge of the cliff. Sho-Pir and Baktior exchanged glances: Fish Bones was approaching.

"Look! My wife!" cried Karashir in happy excitement as he ran over to Sho-Pir. "I threatened to beat her if she did not come to the meeting."

Sho-Pir knew only too well that Karashir would not hurt a fly, and that it was Fish Bones who did the beating in their house.

"I see that your wife is afraid of you, but I must ask you not to beat her today."

"Once she has come I shall not touch her," answered Karashir with an air of importance, moving off to one side.

Four more women came along the path to the wastelands. People strained forward to make out who they were. As they came closer, everyone recognized four old women who held to the faith of the Preordained. They took seats at a respectful distance from the men, who immediately lost all interest in them. Fish Bones went over to Karashir and made him sit down beside her.

To everyone's surprise Bobo-Kalon suddenly made his appearance. He carried himself with the pride and importance of a patriarch, not deigning to glance around or to reply to the muttered greetings of his followers. He carried a staff and picked his way among the rocks instead of jumping from one to another as other people did. Every time the wind blew open his long-sleeved white robe, the sun flashed on the silver buckle fastening his wide trousers. On the old man's shoulder swayed the senile falcon, balancing itself with its wings. Bobo-Kalon sat down on a stone behind everyone else. He placed his staff at his feet and fixed his eyes on the ground as though not wishing to see what was going on about him. The falcon drowsed on his shoulder. As soon as Mirso-Hur and Kendiry caught sight of Bobo-Kalon, they left the shop and directed their steps toward the wastelands. They walked around the assembled canyon-men and turned back, as though they had been unable to find a suitable place for themselves. In their path sat Karashir and Fish Bones. As the merchant passed them he stooped in an offhand manner and whispered to Fish Bones:

"If you take the side of Nisso, I shall demand payment of all your debts!"

"What did he say to you?" demanded Karashir as soon as the merchant and Kendiry were out of hearing.

"He said that my husband was a fool," snapped Fish Bones, causing Karashir to sniff with displeasure.

The merchant and Kendiry sat down alongside of Bobo-Kalon and spoke to him, but the latter only frowned and kept his eyes on the ground.

"Naná has not come," whispered Baktior uneasily to Sho-Pir. "There are no women at the meeting. What shall we say?"

Sho-Pir was as uneasy as Baktior, knowing as he did that there could be no avoiding a discussion of Nisso. It was not for nothing that Bobo-Kalon and these old women who were fanatic adherents of ancient traditions had come, and that Mirso-Hur and Kendiry had taken their places next to Bobo-Kalon. At any rate, the question of Nisso should be postponed to the very end. Perhaps at least a few of the followers of the Preordained would leave before then.

When most of the residents of Siatang had gathered and were waiting impatiently on the rocks, Sho-Pir said quietly to Baktior:

"You better begin."

Baktior beckoned to Hudodod and to two young canyon-men who were members of the Village Soviet (though they had done nothing since the day of their election). When they had taken their places at the granite slab, Baktior stooped down and drew out the second red flag which Nisso had dyed and which they had hidden here the night before. Holding his robe tight about him, he jumped lightly up on a rock next to Sho-Pir, drawing himself to his full height and holding up the flag which was immediately unfurled by the boisterous wind.

"Ee-yo!" cried Karashir enthusiastically, and as suddenly became silent. Baktior demanded quiet and then began to speak quickly and resolutely, accompanying his speech with broad gestures. With a smile Sho-Pir took the flag out of Baktior's hand and thrust its staff into a crack between the rocks.

Forty-three women, representing almost half of the women in Siatang, had spent the summer in the Upper Pasture. They lived in shelters made of stones with dry grass stuffed into the cracks. They slept nestled up to the warm backs of their sheep, shivering with them in the icy winds of the night, waking with them before the dawn. At sunrise they drove their sheep and cows to pasture, and then the high narrow valley became filled with the mooing and bleating of the herds lazily wandering over slopes covered with Alpine flora. Even in the middle of the summer the grasses of these slopes became covered with hoarfrost or snow at night. The women who herded the cattle went barefoot, and it never entered their minds that there might be a life without constant cold, icy winds and deprivation. The dawn gave a rosy tinge to the clouds which blanketed the valley with fog. These great masses of clouds rose unhurriedly, like lazy, many-legged monsters driven by the wind into the blue pastures of the sky. The rocky cliffs lining the valley shone blackly, spangled with a myriad of dewdrops flashing in the oblique rays of the sun. Above the flocks curled light wisps of steam as their rimy wool turned wet. Slowly the warmth of the sun penetrated the valley. The Wives of the Pasture and the beasts they herded rejoiced in this warmth. At last their bodies ceased shivering and life once more coursed through their veins.

The usual day began. The animals munched the grass; the women sang quiet songs and, forgetting the fears forever born of the night, recounted their dreams or spoke of their husbands and children. Now they were busy making campfires at the foot of the cliff. The air became filled with the scent of smoke rising from the bricks of dried dung serving as fuel. On the coal stood iron and clay vessels in which milk mixed with water hissed and steamed. The women gathered about the fires to chew hard balls of sour goat's cheese, and when they had eaten their fill, once more scattered over the valley to see that none of their sheep had become wedged between rocks or had ventured too high up the slopes or had drowned in the pools of crystal water formed by the brook which gurgled through the valley.

In the evening the women returned to the smoky stone

shelters where they milked their goats and sheep and cows. They cautiously balanced the wide basins containing the milk, stirred it with wooden spoons, made butter and sour cream, and filled the skins hanging from wooden pegs on the walls with milk to be fermented. Then they spent the evening about the fires, speaking about their husbands who were not allowed to come to the pasture, about their favourite animals, about the mists which again filled the valley with the coming of nightfall, about the sun which with every day receded lower over the snow-capped peaks of the mountains, and about the devs—the good and bad devs, the big ones and the little ones, the amusing ones and the terrifying ones.

Night found the women lying among the huddled sheep. They did not immediately fall asleep. The moments preceding sleep were haunted by fears: they thought of the mysterious spirits flying among the distant stars, sometimes even blotting out their light; they thought of the panthers of the snow regions which sometimes stole down to the enclosures and stood miaowing like huge cats seeking their prey. When at last the women fell asleep, they tossed until morning, digging their nails into the warm wool of the sheep, groaning and sighing in the grip of dreadful dreams.

The wind wailed above them, the suspended glaciers snapped and cracked, and a cold moon wandered forlornly across the sky trying to penetrate the dark clouds which it washed with pale green light.

Three days had passed since Gulriz had come to this valley hidden among the summits. The first thing she had done was to make the rounds of the herds in search of her cow and two sheep. When she found them she felt the flanks of the sheep and the udders of the cow, muttering, "Praised be the Protector for keeping them well." Only then did she go to the camp to rest after her difficult climb.

When all the forty-three women had gathered together that evening, Gulriz told them the news of the village: how much grain each had harvested, who was well and who was ill, about the blowing up of the tower, about the new canal and the distribution of land, about everything of interest to these women who had spent the entire summer in the pasture. Not all of them were equally friendly with Gulriz, but all of them spoke to her as their equal. Two or three of the women

were wives of impoverished sayids, one was a relative of the khalifa who had decamped to Yakhbar, while another was the niece of former judge Nauruz-bek. The rest were wives and daughters of faqirs, some of whom disliked Gulriz because her son Baktior denied the Preordained. But all these women lived the same life in this place. All of them helped each other, all of them were cold and lonely, all of them tended the cattle, all of them were afraid of devs, and all of them ate and drank and slept together. Each respected her elders, and Gulriz was the eldest among them. For that reason they listened attentively to her words.

The first evening Gulriz said nothing about the arrival of Nisso in Siatang. But the next morning she went out to pasture with the wives of those who supported her son Baktior. She told them about this event, adding that she had always longed for a daughter, and that now she had one living in her own house. She gave such a detailed description of Nisso's past life, of her suffering and misfortune, that all of them began to pity the girl. Old Gulriz well knew how to rouse the pity and sympathy of the women of Siatang!

That day the news of Nisso spread among all the women in the summer camp, and each of the forty-three women passed judgment according to her own lights.

Gulriz did not reveal her secret hopes. Why should the women know that some day Nisso might become the wife of Baktior? Gulriz knew only too well the force of envy and ill-will, and was not her son Baktior the finest of all the young men in Siatang? On the other hand, no one would envy or wish evil to an old woman for wanting to have a daughter to help her in her household tasks, a daughter who would gladden her dimming eyes. Gulriz reminded the women with whom she spoke of their own lives, and she knew the lives of each of them as well as she knew her own. Half of these women had been born when Gulriz was already married. And so she had heart-to-heart talks now with one, now with another.

"You were born in the year of the Scorpion, Zuaida. When you had lived one cycle and returned to the year of the Scorpion you were worth half a sack of rice, one sheep and a small goat. I remember how Nigmat, who bought you to wife, grabbed you by the hair and dragged you home over the stones of the village that time you spat in his eye. After

that you wept for two winters and two summers. Then when Nigmat was repairing the old canal above the fortress he fell off the cliff along with the rocks and his head was split in two. Do you remember? And that day you did not weep. You smiled after the funeral when your brother Hudodod took you home and said that he would never sell you to anyone else. I know that once you dreamed of having a good husband and strong children, but now you go on living alone. Your life will pass as your youth has passed. Perhaps Hudodod wishes you well, but is there any joy in your heart? What has become of your dreams?"

"Why do you remind me of all this?" asked Zuaida, wide-eyed, lifting her dark face sprinkled with freckles and framed with matted hair smelling of sour milk. "Are not all of our lives the same?"

"What should an old woman do but recall the past?" said Gulriz, as she pressed her wrinkled hands on her knees and got up with a series of grunts and sighs. She crossed the valley and sat down beside another woman.

"Saukh-Bogor, according to your years you well merit the name of 'Grass of the Spring.' But when I look into your face I see wintry wrinkles running from your eyes to your temples. Do not cover your face with your hands. Why should you feel ashamed in the presence of an old woman like me? Yor-Maston, your husband and Issof's brother, was a good man. You loved him and he loved you. Why, then, should he have left the regions of the High Mountains? Have you ceased believing that he is alive? I think he may still be alive, but he will never return. Had he remained here, Issof would never have taken you to wife as the inheritance left him by his brother. I know that you groan in the daytime from the hand of Issof and that you groan in the nighttime as though choked by devils. Yes, your life has changed. The home of your beloved Yor-Maston has become an accursed place. Is it a good thing that you live with Issof? Do you receive any joy from your children?"

"Why should you remind me of such evil things, Gulriz?" answered Saukh-Bogor under her breath as she tore up the grass blade by blade and chewed it with tiny white teeth like those of a woodchuck. "I am afraid of Issof, but it is wrong for you to speak of such things."

"Wrong? Yes, that is true," said Gulriz severely. "It would be better to speak of your happiness. Name only one source of happiness and we shall speak of that."

Saukh-Bogor thought for a long time in her effort to discover one little source of happiness in her life, but nothing came to her mind.

"Can it be that there is no happiness about which we can speak?" asked Gulriz cruelly as she searched the face of her companion with unblinking eyes.

Saukh-Bogor only sighed. With a shake of her head and a caress of the woman's thin shoulder, Gulriz got up and walked away over the luscious grass of the pasture.

Thus for two days Gulriz wandered over the valley. Whenever she would see a woman sitting alone, she would approach like a bird of prey and peck at her very heart with bitter words, leaving her then to brood over her misery. The wise Gulriz knew what she was doing. She also knew that not one of the women would confide these words to her friends, and she took a cruel pleasure in noticing that on the third day of her presence here the Wives of the Pasture no longer sang their songs. They went about in a sullen mood as though they had been poisoned. And when the heart of Gulriz herself became heavy, as though weighed down by an invisible stone, she found a bitter joy in thinking of her son Baktior who would have had to live alone all his days had it not been for the coming of Nisso. She was filled with hatred when she thought of those who wanted to return Nisso to Aziz-khon, and she kept telling herself that the force of her mother love would enable her to prevent this from happening.

Toward evening of the third day Gulriz told all the women in the pasture that a great meeting was to be held in Siatang on the morrow. At this meeting the men would speak about Nisso and Sho-Pir would count the hands of those who raised them in protest against sending Nisso back to Aziz-khon, thus depriving old Gulriz of a daughter. "Have pity on me," said Gulriz. "Come down with me in the morning and raise your hands to show that you want Nisso to remain as my daughter." At first the Wives of the Pasture did not understand what Gulriz wanted them to do. Gulriz explained that according to the sun it was already time for them to leave the summer pasture and that they were not bound to wait for

the men to come and accompany their wives and daughters to the village. Now they were living in a new time, and no one would condemn them for coming to the village alone a few days earlier than they were expected. What if the men were displeased? What if they began shouting at them? There was nothing they could do if all the women shouted back in one voice. When one sheep leaves the flock it is beaten back with a stick, but what can be done if the entire flock runs away?

All forty-three of the women listened to the words of Gulriz, but instead of quietly considering them, they began to talk excitedly.

A great argument arose. The niece of judge Nauruz-bek jumped up and kicked at the pebbles as she shouted that old Gulriz was possessed by devs and they should not listen to her. She said that the ice would crash down from the summits on the heads of those who listened to such impious words. Many of the women cried that they would not leave the pasture in violation of the Preordained. Others said that they respected the mother of Baktior and pitied her, but they would not go because they were afraid to go. They had to consider the Protector as well as their husbands. His wrath would be wreaked equally on a single sheep and on the entire flock. It might even be wreaked on the entire village, and on the husbands who had failed to teach their wives the proper submission, and on the children and on the orchards and on the whole Land of the Mountains. But Zuaida, Saukh-Bogor, and a few of the other women remained silent. Gulriz seemed not to notice them. She said not a word, but sat with her fingers knotted in her hair, lost in thought. Gulriz seemed in very truth to have lost her mind.

The cries and arguments continued until late at night, keeping even the frightened sheep awake. But Gulriz realized that her cause was lost. The Wives of the Pasture would not go below with her on the morrow. Nisso would never become the wife of Baktior. Gulriz' last days would be as withered and empty as the last days of all the Siatang women.

During the night she left the camp and wandered over the lifeless valley which was now enveloped in black fog. She thought of descending to the village all by herself and went to the sole path leading down from the pasture. But

in the darkness of the foggy night she might slip and fall; she must wait until morning.

Old Gulriz stood wringing her hands above the bottomless abyss. She felt that now, as in her youth, she was being choked by tears. But no tears came. Only hard, dry sobs rose in her breast. Dropping her hands helplessly, the old woman turned and walked towards the camp. She entered the enclosure filled with the loud breathing of the flock, put out her hand to feel the fat flanks of the sheep, then pushed their curly bodies aside to make a place for herself among that warm mass.

At dawn, when the sheep began stirring and bleating in plaintive, many-toned voices, Gulriz got up and pushed her way out, walking past the other women to the exit from the camp.

The women watched her in silence. But when she had passed the fence and continued tramping over the chilled grass without looking back, Zuaida suddenly ran after her, waving her arms and crying:

"Gulriz! Wait for me!"

Gulriz stopped and stood as though considering whether it were worth turning around. She stood there straight and thin, chilled by the wind, until she heard the bleating and hoof-beats of sheep running through the gate. Two cows caught up with Gulriz, and as she glanced at them out of the corner of her eye, she saw that one of them was her own and the other belonged to Saukh-Bogor, and that both of them were loaded with wooden vessels, tattered goat hides and skins containing sour milk. Gulriz turned around, thinking that the entire herd was running after her, but she saw that the wattled gates were again closed, while down the path came Zuaida, Saukh-Bogor and six other women—all those who had remained silent during the argument of the preceding night.

Gulriz immediately understood everything. Her hard eyes suddenly began to shine and unexpected tears flowed down her cheeks. She brushed them hastily away, and when Zuaida said, "We talked it over during the night. The others do not wish to come, but we are coming," she answered sternly, "The Protector will send you happiness for taking pity on an old woman."

The sheep ran alongside of her, driven ahead by the women in the rear. The cows moved ahead slowly with a rattle of

pots and jars. Zuaida caught up with Gulriz and took her arm, proceeding slowly like a daughter leading her mother.

Gulriz kept her eyes fixed straight ahead. Releasing Zuaida's arm, she took the steep path winding down from the pasture. The sheep stretched out in single file behind her; the women followed the sheep; the valley with its frozen green grass remained far above them, cut off from view by rocky cliffs, while the blue smoke of the camp curled down through the canyon, pursuing these violators of the Preordained, these women defying fears implanted by age-old tradition.

Eight women followed Gulriz to the village of Siatang where the Soviet celebration was being held that day. For the first time in the history of Siatang, eight women left the Upper Pasture unaccompanied by the men, in violation of the Preordained. They were following the dictates of their grief-withered hearts, ignorant of the fact that they were writing a new page in the history of Siatang.

5

From her position on the porch Nisso could see all that was happening below. She saw the people run along the canal and spread out over the wastelands. She saw the red flag unfurl at the place where her sharp eyes made out the figure of Sho-Pir (who probably was not giving her a thought at that moment). Someone, probably Baktior, climbed up on the stone under the red blur of the flag and waved his arms. Sometimes the wind brought her the murmur of voices. Once every one rushed over to Sho-Pir. At first Nisso was frightened, but as she looked closer she could see that one by one the canyon-men crowding around him stretched out their hands toward something black which Sho-Pir held in front of him. Then the crowd began to break up and several men ran along the ditches through the wastelands. More and more people moved away from the group, but then they once more gathered around Sho-Pir, jostling together and waving their arms.

Nisso became hungry. She brought herself a handful of mulberries from the wooden bowl in the storeroom and continued her watch. For some reason Nisso was no longer worried about her fate. Perhaps this was due to the fact that seen from this distance the figures out there were too tiny

to seem menacing, or perhaps she was simply tired of worrying. At any rate, what she saw only interested and amused her.

Suddenly a man in a white robe appeared on the path to the house. As he came closer Nisso saw that it was Baktior.

Naturally he was coming for her; she would have to go down there to those people. Immediately the tiny figures in the valley became cruel, hostile beings. They would discuss her and pass judgment on her as though she were guilty of some crime. They would wish to do her harm. Sho-Pir would shout and quarrel with them. In general it would be dreadful. It was already dreadful. Baktior was coming closer and closer. What would he say? He would say, "Run away! They have decided to give you up."

But perhaps he would say something else. What would happen?

Nisso hunched her shoulders as though stricken with a chill. As she stood there waiting she began nervously studying the new clothes she had received from Kendiry and the brass bracelet on her left arm which now shone so blindingly in the rays of the sun. With trembling fingers she played with the tassel at the end of her red braid.

Baktior came up to the porch.

Realizing that her cheeks were flaming, Nisso covered them with her palms. She tried to smile at Baktior, but the smile would not come.

"So you have come back, Baktior?"

"Yes, I have come, Nisso," replied Baktior simply. "Let us go down there. They will talk about you now." His eyes slid over her figure in a last minute examination, and he said, "Are you going in those clothes?"

There had been a discussion of her clothes that morning. Sho-Pir had said, "Let her go in those. She can hardly appear before everybody in Gulriz' tunic." Baktior had agreed, but now again he returned to the subject. Why?

"What has been going on down there?" asked Nisso, and Baktior did not dare to repeat his question.

"Our people are very foolish," he said quickly, with a short laugh. "We distributed the lots. Did Sho-Pir tell you how we would do it? This is how: Sho-Pir held out his cap and people took turns drawing stones out of it. Karashir wanted the lot marked by the fish and so did Issof, but the

stone with the fish on it fell to Hudodod. He went to look at his lot and Karashir and Issof ran after him. First they beat him and then they fought each other. Karashir pulled Issof's beard and Issof yanked off Karashir's sheepskin. Sho-Pir shouted at them in a voice that would cause the very trees to wither. He ran after them and tore them apart and began to upbraid them. But come, we have no time to talk. They are waiting for you."

But Nisso had not yet plucked up sufficient courage, and she wanted to draw out the conversation.

"Did they give you a lot, Baktior?"

"Of course they did. It is a good enough lot. Will you help me sow wheat there in the spring? Answer me, Nisso—will you help me? How nice it would be if we began working together!"

Baktior looked at Nisso in such a way that for the first time she felt self-conscious in his presence. But she only threw back her head and answered quickly, so that he would not notice her embarrassment:

"What will you sow? Have they talked about the grain for sowing? What did they decide?"

"They argued about it for a long time. Some of them said, 'Our stomachs are shrinking. For a whole year we have waited for bread!' Fish Bones shouted, 'I have eight children!' Still others said, 'We do not want to wait for the caravan! We are hungry! Better to be hungry next year than now!' Do you know what Sho-Pir replied?"

"I am sure Sho-Pir replied very well."

"He said, 'There is no hunger now. There are places where the people eat nothing but grass. You are not reduced to eating grass yet. Better to eat mulberries for another twenty days than to go hungry all winter and next year besides. If you begin to eat the grain we have just gathered, how long will it last? What will you sow in the spring?' That is what Sho-Pir said, and one of the faqirs answered, 'That is right. Only a donkey eats the grass under his feet and lies down on manure. We are people, and not donkeys. We must not touch the grain. We must not grind it up.' That is what he said, and everyone was tired of arguing. Mirso-Hur began to speak, but they would not listen to him."

"Does that mean they will not touch the grain?"

"Yes. They said they would not. Let us go now. I am worried that Naná has not yet returned."

Nisso did not want to go.

"Come on, Nisso. Do you hear?" said Baktior loudly but irresolutely.

"What will happen to me, Baktior? Tell me, Baktior."

He heard the pleading in Nisso's tone, and he felt unhappy.

"Come on. I do not know."

Suppressing a sigh, Nisso got up and silently descended the steps to the porch. Baktior followed after her, forgetting the custom according to which men should go first. Nisso held her wide sleeve over her nose and mouth as she went down the path. Her face was pale and troubled. She made no effort to conceal her fears from Baktior and he had not yet learned how to console a woman. He too walked in silence. "What if they decide to turn her over to Aziz-khon?" he thought. "Sho-Pir will never agree to that. Sho-Pir will hide her and take her away to the Volost like he said last night. What shall I do then? I shall also go. Sho-Pir will return to Siatang, but I shall remain there. I shall go on living alongside of her."

Nisso's artificial red braids hung over her shoulders, and at every step the red tassels at the ends struck her knees and swung widely away. Baktior watched Nisso's bare toes and was amazed to see how sensitively they detected the sharp edges of the stones.

Nisso walked along as submissively as a lamb being led to slaughter. Her thoughts were about Sho-Pir. Had he the power to save her? As they drew near the wastelands her eyes sought him out among the crowd of canyon-men. When she had found him, she gave a deep sigh. The flag was waving above the large granite slab. Nisso stood still and gazed intently at the flag, feeling that it would help her in her moment of need. When she continued on her way her step was resolute and her eyes were challenging.

6

"Does the decision rest with the majority?" asked Mirso-Hur, who was the first to break the silence with which the canyon-men had greeted the appearance of Nisso.

The silence had been long and tense. It began when Baktior led Nisso to where Sho-Pir, Hudodod, and the other members of the Village Soviet were sitting. It continued while two hundred eyes came to a focus on Nisso's face, hands, braids, and clothes in the effort to understand this girl whose name had been on everybody's tongue of late. The talk had been both open and secret, loud and hushed, full of kindness and of malice, of calculation and of envy. Here she was before them now as in the judgment seat—an unfaithful wife, a runaway who had risked the wrath of the most powerful man in the High Mountains. She was indeed beautiful. Everyone could see that. Aziz-khon had been no fool to buy such a wife. She must be a brave creature. She stood there covering only her chin and her lips with her hands, while her eyes looked straight ahead. How bold was the glance of her eyes!

Only too well did Sho-Pir understand the significance of Mirso-Hur's question. It was a vicious question, but there could be only one answer. How many times had it been asserted that now all matters were to be decided by the majority!

Sho-Pir could not keep his mind off the absent Gulriz and the Wives of the Pasture. As he glanced at the men seated about him he could count only a few who might openly defy the Preordained. With a hostile glance at the merchant Sho-Pir answered sharply:

"With the majority!"

The silence continued. Unconsciously the merchant rubbed his hands in satisfaction.

"Should I speak now or wait to hear what the others have to say?" thought Sho-Pir. "Probably it would be better to let them have their say. I must listen to them first." He got up and addressed the canyon-men who were waiting for someone to have the first word.

"Comrades," he said, "Here is the girl who has come to us from Yakhbar. They make life miserable there, so people come running away to us on the Soviet side. This girl wants to live with us like a human being. She came to us to find justice and protection. Let her know that our people are free and have a sense of justice. Who wants to have the first word?"

"I do!" said the goitrous Nauruz-bek as he slowly got up. Everyone became all ears, for it had been a long time

since the former judge had addressed the people. "You said that our people had a sense of justice, Sho-Pir, and that is quite right. Our people do indeed have a sense of justice, but you do not understand it. You have not lived long among us and there are many things you do not know. You do not know who created the High Mountains, but we do. They were created by the Silent One when he saw that the world had become contaminated by sin. He created them so that one spot might remain sinless. Our people populated these mountains. The rays of the green star shone down on them alone. But one day a woman came to our land. She came from sinful places, and she brought the contamination with her. That night the green star went out and fell down upon the earth. The stones which until then had been green, became black that night. Ever since then our land has been called the Foothills of Death. All the stones here are black, and they crush the earth. Do you think that our sky is bright? Glance quickly at the sky and you will see that at first it is black, and only later does it seem to become blue. It is very, very black. All this is the work of that woman who came to our mountains. Ever since she came all her offspring have been black, and black are their souls. Do you know who those offspring are? They are called faqirs. You say that our people have a sense of justice, but that is not true. Only those who are not descendants of that woman—the shaná, the sayids and the mirs—are just and white. You are a newcomer, Sho-Pir. What can you be expected to know about our people? What do you know about the shaná, the sayids and the mirs? Do you know that the mirs, the shaná and the sayids do not wear black clothes; that god has forbidden them to own black cattle; that every black lamb that is born to them must be slaughtered; that if a mir comes to visit a home in which they have only a black coverlet to offer him, he will never sleep under it? He will leave that home, for thus it is decreed by the Preordained. Take a look about you. We are sitting here together in black and white robes, but who is wearing the black ones? The faqirs, the descendants of sin, the descendants of the woman who turned our land into the Foothills of Death, the descendants of the woman who put out the light of the Green Star. I see only one faqir wearing a white robe. Did you don it on purpose, Baktior, in order

to scoff at the Preordained? Scoff! Your hour will yet come!"

Nauruz-bek shook his fists in frenzy. His goitre trembled under his chin. Saliva sprayed from his lips, and he turned from Sho-Pir to address the whole crowd. It seemed that he was ready to throw himself like a wild animal on anyone who might dare to contradict him.

"You say a woman has come to us?" he cried. "Ho! Do you call that a woman? Look at her everybody! At first glance she seems to be like everybody else. We know that she is the wife of a Khan, but she was born of a faqir. Her soul is black. Black and despicable is her soul. This is only the scurrilous likeness of a woman, a woman who has committed a sin worthy of death. What will happen if we allow her to remain among us? The sun will stop shining and fall on the earth. All the grass and the water will become as black as the stones became that other time. All people will die. And the mountains, which as a result of the first sin became the Foothills of Death, will now become the Mountains of Death. Is that what Sho-Pir wants? Is that the sense of justice of which he speaks? And is that the freedom for which you are waiting, faqirs? Do not listen to Sho-Pir, people. He is a madman. Let the women themselves tell you whether my words are right or not. Here they sit, these wise old women. You are a wise woman, Zaynat Bogadur. Get up and speak your mind!"

Nauruz-bek became silent and one of the four old women waiting at some distance got up and turned to the canyon-men who were waiting with bated breath.

"In my sleep I saw three moons," she said. "Three moons in the sky did I see on the night when this one appeared among us." The old woman pointed a bony, trembling finger at Nisso who was standing as still as a statue. "What is the meaning of my dream? This is what it means: two moons came into the sky to wait until the sun should stop shining. Verily Nauruz-bek speaks the truth. In the morning when I milked my cow, the milk which came from its udder was sour. That means the grass is already beginning to turn black. We do not perceive this because the sun has not yet stopped shining; but the stomach of the cow is sensitive to everything; beasts are always aware of disaster sooner

than people. Who can explain why I should have had such a dream on the very night when this runaway wife of Aziz-khon came to Siatang? Who can explain that?"

"Let Bobo-Kalon explain it!" cried a voice from the crowd. "Let the wisest of our elders explain it!"

"That is right," exclaimed Mirso-Hur, raising both his hands. "I am not of your people and it makes no difference to me. I am ready to listen to anyone. But let us hear Bobo-Kalon. Say what you think, Bobo-Kalon!"

Sho-Pir and Baktior exchanged glances.

"Bobo-Kalon! Bobo-Kalon!" came from the crowd.

"Let him speak, and to hell with him," thought Sho-Pir as he nodded to Baktior. "Let them have their whole say." Then he stretched out his hand to Nisso who was standing pale before them and said, "Sit down and do not worry."

Nisso took a seat on a stone.

"Do not drop your head. Keep looking at them," whispered Sho-Pir. Nisso placed her elbows on the slab and rested her chin on her palm.

Bobo-Kalon got up. Leaning on his staff, he raised his eyes above the heads of those who were sitting there and focused them on the peaks of the mountains. He spoke slowly, as though reading words engraved on the summits which were visible to him alone.

"My beard is white, my hands are withered, I have lived five cycles; five times have I lived from the year of the scorpion to the year of the hare. Foolish are those who wish to change the world, which remains eternal and unchangeable. That mountain has always stood as it now stands. The river which is flowing behind me has always roared as it is now roaring, and never has the water within it been more nor less. And the sun has ever shone and the grass has ever grown and the night has followed every day and the moon has ever sailed in the night sky. That has ever been, as it now is. Thousands of years ago it was thus and it has continued to be thus for thousands and thousands of years. It is not for man to change that which has been ordained. This is the truth, and the truth is charged with wisdom and light. Herein lies happiness for every individual."

"Are you now thinking of your own happiness, Bobo-Kalon?" cried Baktior scathingly.

"I feel the poison of your words, Baktior," continued Bobo-Kalon. "My own happiness lies in calmness of spirit and a contemplation of truth. But now I am thinking of the happiness of those who are gathered here. I am thinking even of those who at present are possessed of unrest. I am thinking of the white people as well as of you, the black faqirs, seeking happiness in falsehood. Nauruz-bek was right when he said that the first sin came from a foreign woman, a sin that extinguished the light of the Green Star. Now again a foreign woman has come into our midst. Formerly could such a discussion have taken place? Such a woman would have been put in a sack and all the people would have beaten her with sticks before throwing her into the river. But times have changed. A discussion of justice has arisen about this woman. Yet all that transpires is in accordance with the will of the Protector. This is my word. Let the woman remain among us that the sun may stop shining and the grass turn black."

Bobo-Kalon sat down upon a rock. Nisso's heart was filled with fear, and she turned to Sho-Pir.

Since he was familiar with the strong influence tales and legends held over the minds of the canyon-men, Sho-Pir realized that he too must find words vivid enough to fire the imagination of the canyon-men. His brain worked like lightning. All things on earth were changing every instant: the river was cutting into the mountains; the canyon was growing broader and deeper; at one time the canal of the Khans had not existed at all and the valley had been watered by a stream which had since disappeared; only a year ago there had been no new canal. . . .

But the time would come to speak of these things. Now he must say something else:

"Very well, now you must listen to me!" said Sho-Pir getting up and stepping forward. "It is true that I came here from far away. But I too know certain things. The world of your mountains is not the entire world. There are various lands on our vast earth. There are lands where you may ride horseback for a whole year and never see a single mountain. There are lands where the trees are so dense that if you should light a fire and fan it with the wind, the flames would never succeed in consuming all of them. There are places where

there is no land at all—only water. Water everywhere. A desert of water. There is not even any word in your language to name this world of water. How can one describe the innumerable places on our earth! There is, for example, the land where the sun does not rise for half a year, and during this time the days and nights are equally dark. During the other half of the year the sun never leaves the sky, and then there is no night."

Sho-Pir faltered and thought to himself, "The devil! Why have I read so few books!" Beads of sweat broke out on his brow as he felt the expectant glances of the canyon-men fastened on him. He took off his cap and twisted it in his fingers, touching the points of his Red Army star. Suddenly he held his cap up and began to speak quickly and confidently.

"Look here! What do you see shining here? It is a star; the red star you have seen so often on my cap. Have you ever given this star a thought? No, of course not! Where does it come from? What does it mean? I shall tell you. Once there were many troubles in the land from which I come. For a thousand years these troubles had been accumulating. There were people who were more like wolves than human beings, and they did away with all justice in that land. They themselves were white, and their hands were white, but their hearts. . . .

"Look at those snow peaks. Are they far away? Well, the fields of grain in our land stretched from here to those snow peaks. And the wheat in those fields grew as high as my chest. You have never even dreamed of such wheat! My people gathered this wheat, which if stacked in a single pile would rise higher than your mountains. Yet they themselves went hungry—more hungry even than you. Why did they go hungry? Because the accursed pack of wolves took everything away from them. A million. I think that all the mulberries on all of your trees would come to less than a million. But there in my country we have many millions of people. The accursed ones had guns and jails and executioners to deal with people like us—the millions. They made us do their bidding, and they sank their teeth into the throats of those who were not submissive, or they bound them hand and foot with iron chains. But we rose against

them and fought them and died in torment. And then there came a man who was the wisest of the wise, the greatest man the world has yet seen. And his heart was so filled with a love for justice and a hatred for evil that it was as though all the people of the world were contained within his heart. And through his veins flowed living red blood which gave birth to immortal words—the all-powerful words of the whole people. And from these words sprang a huge red star. Then the closest friends of this great man went forth, while behind them followed thousands of others—brave men with winged spirits—and they spread over the world the light of the Red Star. It penetrated millions of hearts, which immediately burst into flame, consuming the accursed evil-doers and giving birth to the joy and happiness and justice of which people had dreamed for thousands of years.”

“Now I shall tell them all right,” thought Sho-Pir. “Now I am going good. I shall tell them about the October Revolution and about Comrade Lenin and Comrade Stalin and how we fought the civil war and how. . . .”

“Sho-Pir! Sho-Pir!” cried Baktior, pulling his sleeve to rouse him from the inspiration of creating this new tale. “Look! They are coming! Hurry, hurry!”

“What is the matter?” asked Sho-Pir turning around. “Who is coming?”

“The Wives of the Pasture are coming! Look!”

Sho-Pir turned, and all the canyon-men followed his example. From behind the last house in the village they saw the cows come leaping with a rattle of wooden dishes and a vociferous mooing as one of the women drove them along. Behind her came a scattering of sheep, leaping over the stones as still other women shouted and struck them with twigs, obviously driving them toward the meeting out on the wastelands.

7

Such a thing had never happened before. Everyone at the meeting knew that such a thing had never happened before. The world was turning upside down before their very eyes.

That the Wives of the Pasture should return before their time was up and without the men! . . . And these Wives

of the Pasture were hastening to the meeting, unafraid of the men who were looking at them. Nor were they a vision or a dream. Here they came in flesh and blood, running along the path, driving the cattle before them, while at their head ran the old woman Gulriz waving the sleeves of her white tunic, with her hair streaming out in the wind. Behind her. . . .

Each of the canyon-men strained his eyes to identify the women following her. It could not be that among them was his wife or daughter!

Sho-Pir stood with his hands in his pockets while the corners of his mouth twitched. At that moment he felt an urge to break out in joyful, irrepressible laughter. Unconsciously his large hot palm squeezed the shoulder of Nisso, who had drawn toward him confidently.

The cows were mooing and the air was filled with the bleating of sheep, while the sharp cries of the women were carried far and wide.

Could it be that old Gulriz had succeeded in enlisting the support of all the women? What would happen now? What would happen?

The smile faded from Sho-Pir's face. Five, six, . . . eight . . . nine. . . . The sheep kept coming, but where were the rest of the women?

Were there only nine of them? Would no others appear from behind the cliff?

These nine were already close enough for the canyon-men to distinguish their faces, but Sho-Pir kept looking beyond them to where the dark shack of Karashir huddled beneath the cliff with the path running past.

The path was empty.

Baktior tugged at Sho-Pir's sleeve and whispered anxiously:

"Where are the rest, Sho-Pir?"

Sho-Pir passed his hand over his eyes as though his sight were exhausted.

"There are no more, Baktior," he replied in a dull voice. Then turning his gaze to the crowd he whispered, "It makes no difference. Do you understand? Even if there are only nine, still it is a wonderful thing."

When they reached the wastelands the cows came to a

standstill and rent the silence with their prolonged, stubborn mooing. The bleating sheep scattered in fright while the women tried to herd them together by shouting and lashing out at them.

As soon as Sho-Pir recognized Saukh-Bogor, his eyes searched out Issof, whom he found standing tense, with his hands clenched. In another minute he would hurl himself at his wife. In order to save the situation, Sho-Pir left his place and jumped lightly from rock to rock, making his way through the crowd to the women.

When he reached them he cried out in a cheerful voice: "Today is indeed a holiday; do you hear, comrades? A big holiday! Our women have returned to us today!" Then he cried out so that all could hear before having a chance to appraise the situation: "Welcome, Saukh-Bogor! Welcome, Zuaida! Welcome, Nafiz! Welcome all of you! We were waiting for you, Gulriz! Forget the sheep! Come with me to a seat of honour!"

Who of the men in Siatang had ever spoken thus with women?

But Sho-Pir took Saukh-Bogor by the elbow and led her and the other women to the large rock where Baktior, Hudodod and their comrades were standing. He knew that now Issof would not hurl himself at his wife. There he stood letting the women pass—pale, indignant, his lips trembling, unable to comprehend what was happening. How was it possible that they should lead his wife past him while he stood powerless to stop them, not daring to vent his fury on her!

Saukh-Bogor lowered her eyes and became as white as a sheet. Only now did she fully realize the boldness of her behaviour; but Sho-Pir offered her encouragement. The other women huddled together as they followed him through the crowd under the battery of the men's eyes.

Bobo-Kalon was sitting on a rock to their right. Sho-Pir passed as though he did not notice him, but his quick glance took in everything: Bobo-Kalon's staff was broken in two. He sat with his eyes fixed on the ground, poking at some discarded object while his own gaze was substituted by that of the falcon perched on his shoulder, which kept stretching out its neck and lifting its beak to throw wicked glances at

the women. Next to Bobo-Kalon sprawled Kendiry, with his elbows on a rock. He seemed unperturbed, with the shadow of a smile playing about his lips. Why should he be smiling? The merchant Mirso-Hur was stroking his black beard with the same sullen expression as that of Bobo-Kalon.

"Sit down, friends," said Sho-Pir calmly as he led the women to the granite slab serving as a table. "Hudodod, seat your sister beside you. Sit down, Zuaida. Here is Nisso who has been so eagerly waiting for you."

Sho-Pir took his former place and turned sharply to the crowd.

There was no longer silence. A slow, dull murmur was rising among the people. The moment for interrupting that murmur must not be lost.

"Nauruz-bek! Listen, Nauruz-bek!" cried Sho-Pir clearly and resolutely. "You said, 'Let the women themselves pronounce the word of justice!' Zaynat Bogadur has told us about the three moons and about the sour milk. She is an old and wise woman. But here is another old and wise woman among those who have returned to us. Who of us does not know our Gulriz? We have been holding a discussion as to what to do with Nisso, Gulriz. You tell us your opinion and we shall listen."

"There is nothing she can say," shouted Fish Bones, jumping up with distorted face and folded arms. "I too am a woman and wish to have my say! She is a whore, that Nisso! She ran away from her husband and is seeking shelter behind the backs of two men! She is a harlot, and we have no use for her. We must drive her away! Drive her away, away, away!"

"That is right! We have no use for her!" cried Issof. "She will spread her bad ideas! Our wives will no longer obey us! We are no dogs, but the masters of our wives! Send her back to Aziz-khon!"

"Send her back! Let her go away!" cried another canyonman as he stepped over a sheep which was nosing between his legs.

"Stone her!"

It seemed that the decisive moment had been allowed to slip past. But at this point Gulriz ran forward as lightly as a young girl.

"Enough of your howling like wolves!" she cried above the voices of all the others. "Listen to me, an old woman! Who will listen to those aspid tongues? What Fish Bones says is false, and she must in truth be possessed. It is not the men who gave shelter to Nisso, but I myself. I took her into my house because I have no daughter and I wanted a daughter. Let her go on living with me, and all shall see what a fine girl she will become! By force did Aziz-khon take her to wife, and never did she become his true wife! We no longer live under the rule of the Khans. It is a new authority that we recognize now, and what do we care for Aziz-khon?"

Nisso, who had dropped her face in her hands to hide the horror, the insult and dismay which filled her, now raised her head and looked at old Gulriz. Realizing that everything depended on the voting, and that he could no longer count on the Wives of the Pasture, Sho-Pir struggled to think of some simple, decisive words which would influence the canyon-men. He knew that their moods were unstable. A bit of amusing sarcasm and pointed humour could bring them immediately over to his side. He recalled Commissar Karavayev. If only he were here at this moment!

Meanwhile Gulriz was telling the gathering about the hard life she had led which, as all the canyon-men knew, was unspotted by a single unworthy action. Even those who were most hostile to Baktior respected Gulriz, and for that reason they listened to her now without interrupting. The silence that followed her speech frightened Mirso-Hur into thinking that the award on which he had counted might slip out of his fingers. He got up hastily.

"Be quiet, Mirso," whispered Kendiry. "You must not speak."

"I shall speak! Mind your own business!" And with a flourish of his arm, the merchant addressed the meeting. "Gulriz has sung like an old nightingale! Perhaps it has been a pretty song. Perhaps we should let the Khan's wife remain here. Perhaps his curses will not fall on our land. I do not come from here. I am from Yakhbar. There one power holds sway—here another. But there is one law for honest people everywhere. You forget that Aziz-khon paid forty pieces of money for Nisso! If a cow wanders away into another village and the people there do not wish to return it to its

owner, what does the owner say? He says, 'Pay me the cost of the cow or else you are thieves!' Who of you would like people to say that all who live in Siatang are thieves? Give me the forty pieces of money. I shall take them to Aziz-khon and nothing will happen. That is all I wanted to say. What will be your reply?"

The merchant's speech once more created a murmur among the canyon-men. Who among them could raise forty pieces of money?

Again Nauruz-bek rose.

"The majority decides. Raise your hands. We shall count hands."

"Count! Count!" came the cries from the canyon-men.

Suddenly Kendiry got up. Until this moment he had remained the most inconspicuous of all those present. The old men had said what he had expected them to say and what he had wanted them to say. But he desired a different conclusion. The people of Siatang did not exist for him. In the subtle game he was playing they represented no more than the figures on a chessboard. Nisso was as yet only a pawn, but it was with this pawn that he calculated to bring his big game to a close. Now he rose with the greatest self-confidence and said calmly:

"I wish to speak."

It seemed strange that the followers of the Preordained should care to listen to this mere barber, but on hearing his commanding voice Nauruz-bek cried out:

"Let him speak! Listen to Kendiry, everybody!"

The old men who respected Nauruz-bek immediately obeyed by becoming quiet. In the silence that followed, Kendiry walked unhurriedly over to Sho-Pir and smiled at him, then he crossed his arms on his breast in a pious gesture and addressed the canyon-men.

"I am an insignificant person," began Kendiry in a quiet voice. "I live here among you by the grace of the Protector, but formerly I lived beyond the Great River. By the grace of Mirso-Hur, I return to that country from time to time. He entrusts me with his trading affairs. Little people take pleasure in listening to the conversation of great people. According to the extent of his holdings, Aziz-khon is a great person, and great are the matters discussed about him. I listened too. Why

should I not have listened? It has been said that he bought himself a young wife and lived with her. The wife of Aziz-khon was like the petal of a flower. But a woman may be compared to a pool whose waters lie motionless, reflecting the purity of the heavens as long as they are held within bounds, but once these bounds are broken down, they rush forth turbid and impetuous, beating against the rocks and finding no peace, yet knowing no path except that pointed out by the slope of the land. Wherever the land descends, there the water rushes, ever lower and lower.

"Aziz-khon did not close the gates of his home and his wife ran away. Here she is, in the sight of all of you. Various words have been spoken here. Some have said that the sun would stop shining if this sinful woman were allowed to remain here. But it is not this woman who decides the fate of the worlds. Who is she? The unfaithful wife of her husband. Think you that the world contains few such unfaithful wives? Or that because of them even a single blade of grass stops growing? Oh, no! Judge Nauruz-bek was wrong. He took a grain of dust for a mountain. And Bobo-Kalon was wrong. Gulriz said that she wished to make a daughter of Nisso. The old woman needs a helpmate in her household tasks. Do we begrudge her this? No, we do not. Can a woman live alone? I have heard of Soviet laws according to which a woman can indeed live alone. Then let her live here and let her work. She too may be given a plot of ground. Let her sow wheat if she wants to. Mirso-Hur said we should pay Aziz-khon his forty pieces of money. Ho! As though the great ruler wanted a wife who had covered him with disgrace! Of course he does not want her! He would spit on such a wife! He has already bought himself another wife, younger and more beautiful than Nisso, for whom he paid a hundred pieces of money. Aziz-khon is rich and powerful. He can buy himself new wives every day! What are forty pieces of money to him! He could toss them under the hoofs of a donkey. He could give them away to a wandering minstrel. He has already forgotten all about them. And if it were necessary to give them back, Nisso herself could do it. Let her assume the debt. Does anyone live without debts? Are not all of you in debt to Mirso-Hur? And do you consider yourselves thieves, that you have not yet paid your debt to the mer-

chant? The merchant trusts everyone. It is his business to give credit. Mirso-Hur has already had his say; he has already trusted Nisso with a debt. There she sits in new clothes which Mirso-Hur gave her on credit. He also gave her wool that she might knit stockings. She is already working in order to pay back her debt to Mirso-Hur. Let her keep on working. Let her work for two years. Then she will pay back all her debts including those forty pieces of money that Aziz-khon paid for her. We know that Sho-Pir wants to help Nisso. Baktior also wants to help her, otherwise Gulriz would never have taken Nisso as her daughter. Look at me. I came here as a beggar, and now I have everything I need, thanks to the merchant. He knew that anyone who came here would never go back. I did not go back, and I paid him all my debts. Who of us does not intend to pay the merchant? Are we not honest people? But I must tell you that he is offended because trade is bad. I must confess that he even told me he intended to leave this place. Why should we offend him? If he really intends to leave, he will demand payment of all his debts at once. Can any of us pay him? Who of us, I ask you, is in a position to pay him everything at once?"

Kendiry became silent. The canyon-men were also silent. Perplexed by Kendiry's unexpected plea on Nisso's behalf, Sho-Pir also found nothing to say. He saw that no one intended to dispute Kendiry's speech: Bobo-Kalon said nothing, Nauruz-bek said nothing, and all the old men held their tongues. Sho-Pir felt that something which he did not understand lay behind Kendiry's words, but one thing was clear: Kendiry was asking that Nisso be allowed to remain in the village. His arguments were less convincing than those used by the speakers who had made such impassioned demands that Nisso be driven away, yet no one contradicted him. Everyone seemed to agree with him. And the fact was that practically everything Kendiry had said might have been said by Sho-Pir. At any rate, Kendiry's speech was not hostile. The devil only knew what was behind it all!

Kendiry had already turned to Sho-Pir and was baring his yellow teeth in a smile.

"You wanted people to raise their hands, Sho-Pir? Count them. I am the first to raise mine in favour of Nisso's remain-

ing here. Let her live among us; let her be free. Who else wants to raise his hand along with me?"

Kendiry glanced at the crowd. Strangely enough, the first to raise his hand was Nauruz-bek. The old men looked at him uncomprehendingly, but he nodded his head and they slowly lifted their hands in blind obedience. Then Gulriz lifted her hand, followed by Saukh-Bogor and all the women who had come from the Upper Pasture. The poor folk who had received grants of land that day also raised their hands. Scarcely believing his eyes, Sho-Pir saw that a majority had already voted in Nisso's favour.

Bobo-Kalon got up and slowly left the meeting with his eyes fixed on the ground. Mirso-Hur kept tugging at his beard, but said not a word.

Nisso stood erect, while two bright spots burned on her cheeks.

"What do you say to that, Sho-Pir?" asked Kendiry with a smile which might have expressed triumph and might have been sarcastic. "The people have decided that she is to remain here."

Sho-Pir did not answer. He was glad that the people had made such a decision, but he was displeased with himself. Something had happened which was beyond his comprehension. One thing had been made clear to him: Kendiry possessed strange power over those who were faithful to the Preordained. They blindly obeyed this beggar of a barber who had come here from other parts. Who was this Kendiry? Wherein lay his mysterious power? What were his true intentions?

Sho-Pir got up and wearily announced that the meeting was over. Slowly the canyon-men dispersed in a buzz of whispering, while Nauruz-bek did his best to calm the indignant merchant.





CHAPTER SEVEN

1

OF COURSE Baktior would have done the job much more quickly, but he was not in Siatang at present. Nisso had never before built a stone wall, and it took her some time to catch on to the trick. Furthermore, all the stones in the pile were of different sizes, and in order to select suitable ones, she had first to go through the entire pile in the corner. When she had selected a stone, she kept placing it first in one position, then in another, and still it always seemed to her that it did not lie securely and would surely fall out under the weight of other stones.

At first when she had been busy bringing basketfuls of stones from the foot of the cliff and mixing the clay, it had seemed that nothing could be easier than to build a wall. She was sure that her wall would be just as good as the two which Baktior had already built. But today Nisso had begun to work at dawn, and by noon the wall was no higher than her chest, while with every hour the work became more difficult, for it was necessary to lift the stones higher for each new layer.

Nisso worked without respite. She was impatient to see this room (which was to be hers) covered with a roof. She insisted on making a hearth in the centre, though Sho-Pir said there was no sense in having two hearths in the house. Had Baktior's house been like the rest of the houses in Siatang, consisting of only one room for the whole family, then he would have been right, of course. But Sho-Pir himself wanted everyone to have his own room, and how could Nisso live in a room without a hearth!

Nisso was so smeared up that even her hair had lumps of clay in it. If she had continued working alone, the wall

would have reached no higher than her shoulders by evening. But fortunately Sho-Pir came and began to help, laying the stones while Nisso merely brought him the ones he pointed out. Now the work was progressing with amazing speed. How skilfully he handled things! Taking a stone whose weight had bent Nisso nearly double as she hugged it to her stomach, he would toss it from one palm to the other and then place it quickly in the clay mixed with straw. There it lay as though it had nestled down into such a comfortable position of its own accord.

"This one now?" asked Nisso.

Sho-Pir turned around.

"No, the longer one, over there."

As he took the stone from Nisso's hands, Sho-Pir continued the conversation they had been holding.

"You say the grass was worse there?"

"It must have been. Blue Horn never became so fat during the summer."

"Maybe the cow was ailing?"

"That Yakhbarian would never have taken it from my aunt if it had been ailing. All the cows in those parts were skinny. But our cow here—I could scarcely believe my eyes the first time I cleaned it. Not a rib in sight! And so big!"

"You have never seen a really big cow. Hand me that stone over there—the round one. . . . We have cows in Russia that would make that one look like a mere calf. Like in paradise, Nisso. But here—there is not even a decent log for building a roof!"

"What about the one you brought yesterday, Sho-Pir?"

"That poplar pole? In my country we would be ashamed to chop it up for firewood! We have trees the size of this where I come from," said Sho-Pir indicating the girth with a wide gesture. Then he slapped down a lump of clay and smeared it over the stones.

"Everything is better where you come from!" said Nisso musingly as she handed him another stone. "Why do you go on living here?"

"Because I want things to be just as good for you! I want to make things easy for you, you pretty thing!"

"For me?" asked Nisso in a serious tone, and fell silent. For a while she went on working without saying a word.

"Sho-Pir, if your people do not buy their wives, how do they come by them?"

"Very simply: if a man loves a woman, he says to her, 'I love you.' If she also says 'I love you,' then they get married."

"And that is all?"

"What else do you want?" smiled Sho-Pir. "They have a wedding and write in the book that they are man and wife. That is all."

"They write it themselves? . . . Here, is this stone all right?"

"Fine. Hand it up. Of course they write it themselves, and sign their names. You will sign yours too when you get married."

Once more Nisso fell silent. Only the knocking of the stones could be heard.

"I shall never get married," said Nisso decisively.

"Why not?"

"Because nobody will ever love me. I am a bad person."

"What makes you think you are bad?"

"Of course I am bad. The sun may stop shining because of me. Everybody will die, and I will die and you will die. I do not want the sun to stop shining!"

"Oh, you silly! As though the sun had nothing else to do but worry about the behaviour of some little girl! Foolish people talk nonsense and you listen to them!"

"Can you say that Nauruz-bek is foolish? And that Bobo-Kalon is foolish? Everyone says he is the wisest of the wise. I am an unfaithful wife. I have an evil influence on everybody. I must be very bad. Did you not hear what they said about me? Do you not remember what Fish Bones shouted at me? Why are you building a house for me to live in, Sho-Pir? Why do you not drive me away? I shall probably bring you misfortune. Sho-Pir, I keep thinking about it all the time. . . . Here, take this stone."

"What is it you keep thinking about all the time, Nisso?"

Nisso frowned. Perhaps it would be better not to tell Sho-Pir of what she kept thinking. Maybe he would become angry if she told him that she would like to die. Why should she go on living when she was so bad? Why should she bring

misfortune to others, especially Sho-Pir? No, it would be better not to tell him.

"Lost your tongue again! What are you thinking about? That you are in fact a very bad girl, is that it?"

"Yes, Sho-Pir. That is what I think."

"Then tell me whom you have ever wronged. Have you ever killed anyone? Have you ever stolen? Or do you tell lies from morning to night?"

"I do not know, Sho-Pir. . . . No. . . . But listen to me. I shall tell you the truth. . . . I should like to kill someone . . . this way . . . to take a knife and kill him with one blow!"

"Oho! Who is it? Here, hand me that stone. Is it me you would like to kill?"

"You! Goodness no, Sho-Pir!" Nisso threw him such a horrified glance that Sho-Pir sensed a serious undertone to this amusing conversation. "How could you ever think such a thing! I. . . ." Nisso almost pronounced the word she had sworn never to say. "It is not you I wish to kill."

"Who is it then?"

Nisso threw the stone she had just lifted back on the pile and came over to Sho-Pir, who was amazed to see the change which had come over her face.

"It is Aziz-khon I should like to kill," she said softly but emphatically. "And all those who are against me."

"Come, come," was all that Sho-Pir could find to say. "We had better be getting on with our work, Nisso."

Nisso once more began to hand him stones. The wall now reached Sho-Pir's shoulders, so that he had to raise his arms above his head to work. In order to overcome this inconvenience he placed a few large stones at the base of the wall on which he could stand.

"No, Nisso," he said at last. "You are not bad at all. The most important thing is that you are not lazy. That is good, very good. You never sit with your arms folded and Gulriz is pleased with you. You help her in all her work."

"Of course I help her. She is alone. You are busy about the village and Baktior is away. Tell me, Sho-Pir, why is Baktior away so long?"

"Why, are you lonesome for him?"

"No, but Gulriz wonders why he is so long in returning."

"Apparently the caravan has not yet arrived at the Vo-lost. I suppose Baktior is waiting for it there."

"Sho-Pir. . . ."

"Well?"

"I do not understand. Tell me. . . ."

"What?"

"I do not understand why all the people here say that they are hungry. Yesterday when you were not at home Zuaida came to see Gulriz and me. She cried and said that she was hungry. Why should she be hungry? There are apples and berries and milk. Is that such bad fare? When I lived in Duob we ate nothing but boiled herbs and we used to say, 'It is all right as long as we have herbs to eat.' The people in Siatang are greedy. It seems to me that life is very good here."

"Yes, of course. . . . Life is good here. . . ." said Sho-Pir slowly, his mind filled with thoughts of the roast beef, mashed potatoes and onions—crisp fried onions—without which not a single day passed in their army squadron. They had taken a whole herd of cattle with them on their marches, and every evening as soon as they struck camp—Hm-m! Sho-Pir was seized with such an appetite that he ran his tongue over his lips. Here, now, when Sho-Pir saw a sheep, the thought never entered his head that it might be roasted and eaten. No oftener than once a year did the canyon-men allow themselves to slaughter a sheep. Oh, that daily pea porridge! And those apples, and dried mulberries and sour milk! If only he could have one good dinner of borshch and sour cream and black bread and butter!

"Of course life here is good, Nisso," he repeated. "Wait until Baktior brings the flour and it will be still better. Remember my once asking you, Nisso, why you did not wish to return to Duob?"

"Why should I when all the people there are like strangers to me?"

"But you were born there."

"Everyone there treated me badly. My aunt sold me to Aziz-khon."

"In Yakhbar are they also like strangers to you?"

"Yes they are."

"And here?"

"Here? At first I thought they would be the same here. . . ."

"But now?"

"Baktior is here and so is Gulriz and you. . . . And then there is Zuaida and Saukh-Bogor. . . . No, the people here are not like strangers to me."

"What do you mean, not like strangers? I, for instance, am a Russian."

"You, Sho-Pir? You must be making fun of me. You are just my very people!"

"Who is not 'your people'?"

"Aziz-khon is not. Nauruz-bek is not. Bobo-Kalon is not. Fish Bones is not. All those who wish me evil are not."

Sho-Pir smiled and forgot to lay the next stone.

"I agree with you about all of them except Fish Bones. She is 'your people.'"

"She? Have you forgotten what she said about me?"

"She said a lot of nonsense. But you will make it up with her some day."

"Never!" cried Nisso angrily. "She is a stranger if anyone is, with her old lizard's tongue! May a rat leap into her mouth!"

Sho-Pir laughed, and this offended Nisso.

"You do not know everything, Sho-Pir. She does not like you. And she does not like Baktior. She refused to give Baktior her donkey when he went away."

"What do you mean she refused to give it to him? Where is her donkey?"

"See, you know nothing, Sho-Pir. Remember how Baktior made the round of the village collecting donkeys?"

"Yes, I remember."

"He went to her too. I know everything. You were at the canal, but I went with Baktior. You yourself told me to help him round up the donkeys. But Fish Bones did not give us hers. Karashir was sick—he had been smoking opium—and Fish Bones chased us away when we came to her house. 'I will not give you my donkey!' she said. Baktior swore at her and went away. She never gave it to us."

"Why did Baktior not tell me of this?"

"I don't know. You told us to get twenty-five donkeys, but we got only twenty-four. When Fish Bones chased us away, we went to another house—to Zuaida's house. Her

brother Hudodod gave us the last one. He is a good man too. But Fish Bones is a snake and I hate her!"

"You and I will have another talk about Fish Bones one of these days. But we better get on with our work. You climb up on top now—I cannot reach it any more. And I will hand up the stones while you lay them. If I climb up the whole wall will fall down."

"I cannot climb up either, Sho-Pir. The stones may fall."

"Here, I shall lift you. One—two—up you go!"

As he grasped Nisso, unconsciously pressing her toward him, Sho-Pir suddenly became acutely aware of the girl's strength and suppleness. In a second he had lifted her high above his head and she was already straddling the wall. As he caught the sudden shine in Nisso's startled eyes, he said to himself, "Nonsense! She is still a mere child!" Quickly stooping over the heap of stones, he selected the heaviest and handed them up.

"Hold on tight! This is a heavy one!"

Nisso grabbed the stone and pushed it into the clay.

They did not speak any more as they continued their work; the wall was already taller than Sho-Pir.

2

When he had handed over his donkey to the merchant, Karashir smoked so much opium that for three days he was transported to a world of dreams. He was tortured by his old longing for happiness. It seemed to him that he was walking down the middle of a river whose golden waters reached his shoulders. The water buoyed him up so that he strode along at breathless speed. Whenever he flung out his arms the water receded in golden waves. Whole countries swam past at each step that he took. Here, for example, was a country of transparent violet mountains. Karashir could see the women who lived within those mountains moving in a violet mist, like fish in the depths of a lake. They rushed to the riverbank to get a glimpse of him, the great and renowned Karashir. He strove to reach them, but the closer he came to the bank, the denser became the water, so that Karashir could not move his legs. In order to avoid being

suced down into this golden quagmire he turned quickly back into the centre of the river while the women on the bank mocked him with their laughter. . . . Once more the current caught him up. He took a step which meant, perhaps, the passage of an eternity, during which he beheld another land, the mountains of which were covered with bright rugs. He stepped toward them and saw that the sand of the riverbank was made of boiled rice. No one was in sight, and it seemed that all this rice must have been prepared for him alone; he had only to stoop down and eat his fill. But as soon as he approached, the rugs on the mountains became alive with green rats which rushed to the river and began to gobble up the rice. Karashir could hear the rats in this countless horde smacking their lips and grinding their teeth. In his horror he once more threw himself back into the centre of the river. Again the current caught him up and other lands were presented before him. . . . Time was non-existent during this journey down the golden river; thousands of countries flashed past; high hopes were supplanted by utter despair; Karashir laughed with joy and shrieked with horror. Only on the third day was he rescued from the golden river, whose waters suddenly became colourless and very cold, flowing as they did from a pitcher which Fish Bones emptied three times over her husband when she could no longer stand his cries and mutterings.

On coming to himself, Karashir continued lying on his stone bunk for a long time, unable to raise his splitting head. But at least he had become quiet, and Fish Bones knew that after lying there another half day, he would fully recover.

When his head had at last cleared, Karashir glanced over and saw Fish Bones sitting on the floor grinding dried mulberries with a large round stone which she rolled between her knees. Around her were gathered their eight children, waiting for their mother to hand them a bit of this sweet flour.

"Give me some too," whispered Karashir, scarcely moving his lips as he held out a hairy hand.

"So you have come to, have you?" grunted Fish Bones viciously, pushing away his hand. "Where is the flour? Come on, tell me where the flour is."

"Are you crazy? What flour? What is that beneath your very nose?"

"Not that, you dog! Where is the wheat flour? Here, get up!" Fish Bones gave Karashir a yank that made him fall out of bed. "For three days you have been lolling here. Where is it?"

Karashir sat on the floor with his back against his bunk, rubbing his sore thigh as he made an effort to remember.

"I don't understand," he said haltingly.

"So you don't understand? The worms must have eaten up your brains. Nothing left of them, eh? All gone!"

Fish Bones came over to Karashir and struck him hard on the forehead. He drew back. Realizing his guilt, he did not want to quarrel with his wife, and at this moment he was afraid of her.

"I cannot remember," he muttered. "My head aches."

"Where is the donkey? Where is our donkey? I am asking you that—where is it?"

"The donkey?"

Aha! Now Karashir remembered everything. How, indeed, had it all happened? He had taken his donkey to the new lot. Why should he have taken the donkey with him? Oh yes, he had gone for clay to patch the ditch where the water leaked through the stones. On passing the merchant's shop, Mirso-Hur had called him. He had not intended to answer, but the merchant called a second time. So he stopped, and then everything had happened. The merchant had demanded that he give up his donkey in payment for his debts. They had quarreled, after which the merchant promised that once he gave up his donkey, he would give him a whole sack of flour on credit until spring. Just before that Karashir had had an argument with Fish Bones, who demanded that Karashir take their grain to the mill to be ground. He refused to do this because at the meeting they had passed a resolution not to touch the grain. Sho-Pir had asked them not to touch it, and Baktior along with all the others, had agreed not to.

The merchant spent some time persuading Karashir, and then in some mysterious way it turned out that Karashir was standing there with a little bag of opium in his hands, while the merchant was in possession of his donkey. Karashir asked only that he be allowed to cart the sack of flour to his house on the donkey, but the merchant replied that it

would be better to avoid unnecessary gossip by doing it at night. Karashir agreed. He threw away the clay and left his donkey with the merchant and went home. He told his wife that he had been forced to give up his donkey, but that at night the two of them would go to the merchant and bring back a sack of flour. . . .

After that. . . .

He could not remember what had happened after that. . . .

"Did you go to Mirso-Hur for the flour?" asked Karashir, rubbing his aching brow.

"Yes I did."

"Where is it?"

"You are the one to be asked where the flour is, you son of a dog! The merchant did not give me any flour."

"Why not?"

"He said, 'The flour is yours, and nobody will touch it. But let it remain with me for the present. You have your own grain now. When that is gone I shall give you the flour.'"

"Did you explain to him that. . . ."

"How could I explain to him? He only laughed at me and shouted, 'A resolution! Such a resolution is only for fools! Those in power simply want to take the grain away from you. They have probably sold it already to Soviet merchants and are expecting them to come for it. And you believe them!' That is what he said! And he also said, 'There is a mill in the fortress. Go and grind your grain before Baktior gets back. Do it at night,' he said, 'so that Sho-Pir and his followers do not see you.' I told him that then we would have nothing to sow in the spring, and he answered, 'I have been giving you grain every spring for five years. What makes you think I shall not give it to you this year?'"

"He gives it to us? He gives it to us in such a way that now we have nothing to grind."

"Shut up, you fool! He is right. At least he gives it to us. I do not intend to go hungry any longer. I was only waiting until you got those devs out of your head. Tonight we are taking our sack of grain to the mill."

"Are you joking?" asked Karashir half rising from the bench. "I will not go against the general resolution."

"Yes you will!"

"I will not!"

"Yes you will!" hissed Fish Bones. "I have had enough of this! I refused to give Baktior our donkey because I was afraid something would happen to it! You gave it to the merchant, and it is gone forever. Now hold your tongue or I shall tear off your ears!" and she fastened her nails into Karashir's ear. "Are you coming with me?"

Karashir said nothing as he tried to release his ear. Fish Bones slapped his cheek, and then in growing fury landed blow after blow. At last he freed himself, half-stunned, and crawled up onto his bunk, beating off further blows with his hands. Finally he slipped off the stone ledge and made a headlong break for the door, treading on his daughter's hand in his rush. The child let out a piercing scream which brought Fish Bones to her side, thus giving Karashir time to escape from the hut, run through the yard, and find himself among a confusion of boulders. The effects of the opium brought on a fit of dizziness which made him slump down in the space between two large rocks, dropping his head on his hand in despair. Blinded by the pain in his head, he crawled deeper into the opening and fell asleep out of sight of human eyes.

When Fish Bones had quieted the child she went out to search for Karashir. He was not in the yard, so she returned to the house, thinking he would come back of his own accord when he saw that she had calmed down. But Karashir did not come back. "I better find him," thought Fish Bones. "or he will start smoking again."

Leaving the yard, she searched the paths between the rocks until she came out on the round clearing where the canyon-men had so recently threshed their wheat. Karashir was not to be found there either. As she turned back she suddenly caught sight of Nisso. Fish Bones stealthily crept nearer and hid behind a rock to see what the girl was doing. Nisso was on her knees gathering the bits of straw which remained from the threshing and had not yet been carried away by the wind. "Aha!" thought Fish Bones spitefully, "so she is stealing other people's straw!" She came up to Nisso, who turned sharply around but did not get up.

"So it is you, is it?" said Fish Bones testily. "I heard a

rustle and thought my chickens must have wandered over here. What are you doing?"

"We are building a roof. We have clay, but no straw, so I am gathering it here," replied Nisso coldly.

"I suppose it is your straw?"

"It is nobody's, I think—mere chaff to be blown away by the wind. . . ."

"A kind wind it is, to take away from its own and give to strangers! May the Protector help you! I heard that Baktior was building a house for his hireling. A fine thing to be in power—you can hire yourself a servant and nobody will say anything. But I pity you, having them pile all the work on your shoulders."

Nisso jumped up indignantly.

"You are talking nonsense. I work because I want to."

"For yourself or for others?"

"What if I work for others? I am glad to work for good people!"

"Who are these good people?" said Fish Bones, crossing her arms. "Could you mean Baktior? Once he was a faqir like us, then he took over power, put on a white robe, and now he wants to get rich it seems. Because of him my children go hungry and I myself go hungry. He would like us to give up even our own flour!"

"You do not understand! Sho-Pir explained everything!"

"Your Sho-Pir is a dog! You find him good. I find him a dog! You find Baktior also good. One husband was not enough for you—you had to take on two others. Trash! That is what you are!"

"You call me trash? You snake!" In a sudden spasm of fury Nisso threw herself at Fish Bones and fastened her fingers in her hair. "Just call me that again!"

In her turn Fish Bones grabbed Nisso by the braids, shouting:

"Trash! Thief! Stealing other people's straw! Clear out of here!"

Both of them fell down, pulling each other by the hair. Had the stones not been so sharp, the fight probably would have continued for a long time. But Fish Bones was the first to jump up with a nasty scratch on her side. With a

piercing cry of "You want to murder me, to murder me!" she caught up a jagged rock and hurled it at Nisso. But Nisso ducked and would have gone for Fish Bones once more if the latter had not disappeared behind the cliff, leaving a stream of epithets in her wake.

3

Nisso came home irritated and displeased with herself. After all, was it worth fighting with that crazy woman? Fish Bones had badly scratched Nisso's hands and shoulders and torn her dress. But Nisso had given her good measure. It gave her satisfaction to recall the blows she had delivered. To be sure, Fish Bones would now spread the foulest tales about her, but what of it? Nisso would show everyone that she did not give a snap of her fingers for such gossip. She would continue doing everything she could for Sho-Pir—and for Baktior.

Nisso mixed the straw with the clay and impatiently waited for Sho-Pir so that they could begin roofing the new room. When Baktior and Hudodod had left for the Volost they had said they would not return by the Siatang trail leading up from the Great River, but by the shorter and more difficult trail over the Zarkhok Pass. The path leading to the Pass crossed in front of Baktior's house and climbed in a sheer zigzag up the slope of the mountain behind the orchard. Early that morning Sho-Pir had climbed this path in order to reinforce some of the ledges over which Baktior and Hudodod would have difficulty leading their loaded donkeys. Soon the sun would be setting, but Sho-Pir was not yet in sight.

Without waiting for him, Nisso lifted the flat tub containing the clay mixture up on the roof. Tucking up her dress and crawling on her hands and knees, she began smearing on the clay. From time to time she glanced toward the path leading up from the orchard. The air was pure and transparent, so that she could see for a great distance. But Sho-Pir did not appear. Since the waning of the moon the wind had died down, and it seemed that autumn had begged a few more days of winter, so loath was it to part with the Siatang valley. But even without the wind, the days had become cold. Nisso was chilled to the bone, and each time

she thought of Sho-Pir it was with a feeling of chagrin that she had not yet finished knitting his woolen stockings. Up on the path leading to the Pass it was even colder than down here. And he had not lived long enough in the High Mountains to become used to this climate. He must be very cold!

"I have only the tassels to make," thought Nisso. "As soon as I finish this corner I shall work on them. Tomorrow I shall give him the stockings. Soon the snow will be falling."

But she had lost interest in the roof. Tossing back a lump of clay, she wiped her hands and climbed down into the yard. Quickly she washed her hands in the cold stream and went to the porch to ask Gulriz for a ball of blue yarn.

As she approached, she saw that Gulriz was standing motionless with her back to Nisso. The old woman had thrown back her head and was shielding her eyes with her hand the better to see the jagged, snow-blown ridge of the mountain slope now tinted with the rays of the setting sun.

"What are you looking at, Naná?"

Only now did Gulriz notice the girl. She rubbed her neck and gave a deep sigh.

"If Baktior does not return today or tomorrow, our crops up on the mountain will be lost."

"Where are the crops, Naná?"

"See that yellow spot up there?" Gulriz stretched out her sinewy arm to the mountain, indicating with her finger the jagged ridge of the slope lighted by the sunset. "That is where Baktior sowed our wheat, do you see?"

"Now I see," replied Nisso. "He never told me. Why is it so high up?"

"Where can you find any land lower down? I asked him to gather the wheat as soon as the meeting was over, but he said, 'I have no time, mother. I shall manage later. First I must go to the Volost!' He is so busy thinking about other people he never has time for his own affairs. And Sho-Pir said, 'Do not worry, the crops up there can wait a while longer.' But I know that everything will be lost. Tomorrow I shall go up there myself if I can manage to reach it, old as I am. When I was young I was not afraid of anything."

"Do not go. I shall go!" said Nisso impulsively.

The old woman looked the girl up and down as though appraising her strength. Then she shook her head doubtfully.

"The frames are bigger than you are. Have you ever walked with frames on your back?"

"No."

"Then how can you go? You have to balance on the edge of the cliff, hanging on with one toe while you seek a footing with the others. The wind blows hard up there and the frames are so heavy that you cannot jump with them on your back. You must have the experience of many years to be able to climb to such places with frames on your back. If you fall, it is sure death. Baktior fastens hooks made of goat's horn to the soles of his shoes when he goes up there. But he took them with him and there are no others. Sho-Pir wanted to go up, but I would not let him. 'Do not be offended,' I said. 'but Russians cannot climb these cliffs like we can.' He obeyed me and did not go. And you must not go. I too shall not go. Only Baktior could go, but he is not here. Better to lose the crops."

"What shall we sow in the spring then?"

"I don't know. Sho-Pir said, 'Don't worry. There will be something.' How can I guess what Sho-Pir has on his mind? Probably we shall eat grass."

"Naná!" cried Nisso in agitation. "I have often eaten grass; I can live on it. You can too I suppose. But Sho-Pir is a big man with big hands and big feet. He must have much to eat. What will become of him? He will die if he has to live on grass. And Baktior too—he is a man."

"That is what I told Sho-Pir. but he only laughed at me. He said that Baktior would bring flour."

"Do you really think he will bring it, Naná?"

"How can I tell, Nisso? Men first invent things, then they begin to believe what they have invented. Men are always filled with hope. But I am afraid that he may not bring anything."

They spoke a while longer, sharing their doubts. The old woman recalled the difficult winters she had lived through and told Nisso about her life. How hard it had been for her when her husband had become lost in the snows while hunting and she had been left alone with little Baktior! As she listened to Gulriz, Nisso was filled with pity for the old woman and Baktior and herself. Sho-Pir kept telling her about a land over the mountains where life was entirely

different; about a land where people lived a good life. But that was hardly possible. Probably Gulriz was right, and even such a man as Sho-Pir simply made up tales. He was so kindhearted that he pitied Nisso and wanted to cheer her up.

Gulriz told her that the previous spring Baktior had not wanted to take grain on credit from the merchant, so he had gone to the Volost and brought back a sackful which he had sown way up there on the mountainside. Everyone had laughed at him and said that he was crazy. But he had climbed up and cleared the ground and sowed his wheat. Now it was time to harvest it, and he was not here. He spent all his time thinking about other people, but not even a word of thanks did he get for it. There was little friendship among the people in the village. They were like a flock of little chickens without a hen. If only she could gather them all under her wing and warm their hearts!

"Do not dare even to think of climbing up there," said the old woman, pointing to the mountain peaks. "Anyway, we have no frames."

"What would Baktior have used?"

"He would have borrowed them from Issof, Saukh-Bogor's husband."

"I know. I went to his house with Baktior when we were borrowing donkeys. Naná. . . ."

"What is it, my daughter?"

"Give me a bit of blue wool. I have not enough for the tassels."

When she had received it, Nisso went to her favourite rock in the fading orchard, but she had no patience to sit there and knit. She hid her work and ran down to the village.

Saukh-Bogor was very glad to see Nisso and promised to give her the frames on condition that Issof should not find out.

"He does not like you. After the meeting he gave me such a beating that I could not get up for three days." Saukh-Bogor showed Nisso her bruises. "But if you tell anyone, I shall not be your friend any more."

"Very well, I shall not tell," answered Nisso, adding in a sudden burst of fury addressed to no one in particular, "But I would never allow anyone to beat me like that, Saukh-Bogor!"

"Come at night," said Saukh-Bogor as though she had not heard Nisso's last words. "At midnight Issof—" Saukh-

Bogor broke off shortly. "I shall leave the frames against the wall. He will be sleeping at night."

"Very good," agreed Nisso, and asked Saukh-Bogor to explain to her how to pile her load on the frames so that it would not slide off or upset her balance when climbing difficult places.

She returned home pleased and self-confident. Sho-Pir had already returned, but he was very tired and went to bed almost as soon as Gulriz had given him his supper of sour milk and dried apples. He still slept on his felt mat out in the orchard, for in spite of the cold he preferred sleeping in the open air.

Long before dawn Nisso crept out of the house, stole through the orchard and went down to the village. The house of Saukh-Bogor was half way to the fortress. The sky was full of clouds which blotted out the stars and wrapped the canyon in impenetrable darkness. Nisso knew that it would probably snow—probably had already snowed up in the mountains. This would make her climb more dangerous, but Nisso refused to think of peril, convincing herself that she would surely reach Baktior's field.

As she was making her way through a narrow lane leading to the home of Saukh-Bogor, she suddenly heard a scraping of stones in the road.

"Hush, someone is coming. Stand still, you fool," said a voice which undoubtedly belonged to Fish Bones.

"What could she be doing here?" thought Nisso with pounding heart.

"Who is there?" came the frightened voice of Karashir.

The more courageous Fish Bones rose up directly in front of Nisso, who then made out the figure of Karashir bent double under the weight of a sack on his back.

"It is me! Get along with you," answered Nisso angrily.

"So it is you, is it? Aha!" said Fish Bones, backing away in the dark. "What are you doing here, roaming about in the night? Just look, Karashir, the one they decided to take in! While good people sleep, the whore goes wandering. Whom can she be visiting at this hour of the night?"

Nisso felt that in another second she would again hurl herself on this hated woman, but Karashir said:

"Leave her alone, wife. This is no time to quarrel."

For once Fish Bones listened to her husband. Muttering to herself, she disappeared in the darkness along with Karashir, who kept on reproaching her quietly.

Nisso continued on her way filled with conjectures as to what could have been in the sack Karashir was carrying and where he was taking it. Her thoughts were interrupted by her arrival at Issof's house. Quietly she entered the yard and felt for the frames Saukh-Bogor was to have left against the wall. She found them and fastened them with difficulty to her shoulders. Then she set out on her mission, meeting no one else along the way.

Slowly she began her climb, hanging on to protruding rocks whenever a gust of wind threatened to lift her off her feet. The wind dispersed the clouds, and Nisso realized that there would be no snow. She wished to climb as high as possible before dawn, her greatest fear being that Sho-Pir or Gulriz might catch sight of her at such a height with the frames on her back.

When the opposite ridge became crowned with a rosy aureole and the sky turned blue, Nisso was already so high above the village that she could scarcely have been detected by the naked eye. She was hot and breathless, her hands and feet were bleeding, and her hair lashed across her flushed face at every gust of wind. But her glance was quick and exact, noting just the right ledge or crevice for a foothold; her thin, compressed lips expressed strong determination; the toes of her bare feet were so sensitive that they seemed to see what was invisible to the eye.

4

Karashir and Fish Bones continued snapping at each other all along the path to the fortress. As they passed through the crumbling gates and approached the mill, they were surprised to hear the screeching of the grindstone. Water directed here from the new canal flowed gurgling under the mill and emerged in little falls on the other side. Fish Bones felt in the darkness for the entrance, and was the first to step inside the long narrow mill which to her great surprise was filled with people. In a far corner winked the tiny light of an oil lamp dimly illuminating the figures of the men

sitting against the walls. Unabashed, Fish Bones pulled the disconcerted Karashir in after her and jerked the sack off his back onto the pile of other sacks at the door.

"I see there are many people here. praised be the Protector!" she said as she sat down on one of the sacks and glanced at the faces of the canyon-men turned silently toward her. "There is room for you too. Karashir."

Karashir glanced shyly about him as he took a seat.

"A gathering like in the good old times," continued Fish Bones, addressing the silent men. "So you are here, Is-of. . . . And Ali-Mamat. May you be granted good health, noble judge Nauruz-bek. And may your beard be blessed forever, respected Bobo-Kalon. Others have come to grind their grain, and we too have come. I trust you will permit us to do so?"

"The wheel which grinds the grain multiplies the blessings of the living," said Bobo-Kalon in a calm and admonitory tone. "Those who are humble before Him who nourishes us, burn with a spiritual fire and uphold His laws."

Karashir realized that in coming here he had returned, as it were, to the fold of the faithful, and that Bobo-Kalon was reminding him of this fact. Karashir detected a sarcastic smile in the dull eyes of Ali-Mamat, nephew of mir Gemor, who had run away to Yakhbar. Karashir was cut to the quick, and stubbornly remained silent, though he knew that all those gathered there were watching him in expectation of the respectful salutation with which he should reply to Bobo-Kalon. After having defied the Preordained for two years, after having quarreled with everyone in defence of his new loyalties, should he now admit himself to be the most despised of the despised, the most contemptible of all the faqirs in Siatang for the sake of a mere sack of flour?

Karashir kept his eyes fixed sullenly on the huge stone turning slowly, and on the wooden shovel which Issof held to receive the flour piling up about the stone. His lips remained tight closed. Karashir knew that if he met the accusing glances of the followers of the Preordained, he would not have the strength to resist, and would pronounce the words expected of him. But his thoughts were turning like the grindstone. He recalled Sho-Pir's cheerful face and smile and the friendly touch of his hand on his shoulder. A mere talk

with Sho-Pir was enough to make him feel that he was a person worthy of respect. Only in the company of Sho-Pir did he lose his usual sense of being downtrodden. And now when for the first time in his life the august and unapproachable Bobo-Kalon was making overtures to this insignificant faqir and awaiting a response, Karashir could not resist the desire to show that he was not a mere shadow of a man, but that he too had a mind and will of his own. The blood rushed to his head. He knew that the insult he might now offer Bobo-Kalon in the presence of these people who had always been his enemies, would be remembered by Bobo-Kalon to the end of his days. Throwing back his head, Karashir looked boldly into the face of the Khan's grandson, while his eyes shone with animosity.

"Like a lowly miller, the respected shaná is expecting payment from a faqir. What price do you ask for your services, noble Bobo-Kalon?"

Had Karashir struck him with a whip Bobo-Kalon could scarcely have raised his hand more quickly to ward off the blow. Fish Bones immediately threw herself on the ground, hiding her face in her sleeve and stretching out her hand to touch the foot of the old man.

"Forgive him, respected shaná," she pleaded. "Devs have twisted his tongue. The opium has not yet released his reason. Cover your ears. He does not know what he is saying!"

Karashir was frightened by the sight of Bobo-Kalon's clenched fists, his inflamed eyes frozen in their deep sockets, his lips trembling with rage. But he downed his fear and was the first to give vent to his feelings by grabbing Fish Bones by the shoulder, lifting her up and carrying her out into the cold dark night like a sack of flour.

"Get out of here, accursed one!" he cried. "You are to blame for all this. I want none of your flour or your grain. Get out of here! This is no place for us!"

When Fish Bones made an effort to hurl herself at him, he seized her by the neck in a fit of fury and shook her until she hung limp in his hands. Immediately he came to his senses and dragged her to the waterfall behind the mill, where he stuck her head under a stream of cold water. When she still showed no signs of consciousness, he laid her on

the wet stones. He could not see her face in the darkness, but thinking that he had murdered his wife, he dropped his head on her flat breast, threw his arms about her and wept.

Excited voices could be heard in the darkness.

"Too bad. It would be better to divide it up," said someone coming from the mill.

"Nothing of the kind," put in someone else angrily. Karashir saw a dark figure hurry past, bending under the weight on his back: Ali-Mamat was carrying the sack containing Karashir's grain to the water behind the mill. At his heels followed Bobo-Kalon, goading him along with his stick.

"Pour it out!" ordered Bobo-Kalon.

The grain streamed from the open sack into the water. Apparently Ali-Mamat had hoped to save a portion of it for himself, for Bobo-Kalon could be heard crying, "All of it! All of it! And that too! Let the water carry away all this filth!" The water hissed and became quiet.

Karashir lay with his face pressed against the breast of Fish Bones, hearing all this as in a dream. When Fish Bones at last came to her senses with a long-drawn sigh, there was not another soul in the darkness surrounding the mill. The millstone turned rhythmically, the waterfall beat against the rocks, while Karashir began to stroke the tangled wet hair of his wife. In spite of his despair, deep down in his heart he felt that this could not be the end of everything.

5

When Sho-Pir was awakened by the cold in the morning, he threw the quilt off his head and saw that the mountains above the village were covered with snow. The clouds which had enveloped the village during the night had risen in the morning, empty of their burden, to be torn to shreds by the winds of the heights. Like black panels against the fresh white snow stood the flanks of the cliffs. No snow had fallen in the village as yet, but the yellow, withered orchards shuddered in the wind. Every gust sent their leaves circling into the air above the river, the houses, and the stark grey slopes surrounding the settlement.

The first thing that came to Sho-Pir's mind was concern for Baktior and Hudodod. The situation was becoming serious. If they were still waiting for the caravan to arrive in the Volost, all hope of receiving flour must be abandoned. If they had already set out with their load and been overtaken by a snowstorm, they would get stuck at the Pass and it would be necessary to send people to aid them. But how could he find out where Baktior and Hudodod were? Of one thing he was certain: if they had been caught in a snowstorm, Baktior would not abandon the loaded donkeys, but would send Hudodod ahead to the village for help. But Sho-Pir could not wait. He must either go himself or send someone else to meet them.

Sho-Pir threw off the quilt and dressed quickly, shivering with cold. As he climbed the porch, he glanced into Gulriz' room. She was crouching at the hearth blowing up the fire. On seeing him she turned and said in a worried tone:

"Winter has come. Where is Baktior?"

"He will soon be here," answered Sho-Pir, hiding his own doubts. "He is probably somewhere nearby. Is Nisso still sleeping?"

"I suppose so. I have not seen her as yet."

"She must be tired," said Sho-Pir sympathetically. "Let her sleep. Hurry up with the hot water if you can, Gulriz. There is much work to be done today."

When the water had come to a boil and Sho-Pir had drunk a brew made of dried apples, he asked Gulriz to glance into Nisso's room and see why she was sleeping so late. Gulriz returned to report that Nisso's bed seemed to have been slept in, but she was not there.

"Did you see her at all this morning?"

"No. I cannot understand where she could have gone."

Sho-Pir called Nisso a few times but received no response. This was the more strange in that Nisso always told the old woman where she was going when she left the house. Sho-Pir feared that something might have happened to her. He should have realized that Mirso-Hur or the followers of Bobo-Kalon might kidnap the girl for the sake of the reward Aziz-khon would offer. Anything could happen in these parts.

But Nisso's room showed no signs of a struggle. And nothing had broken the silence of the night. Sho-Pir was a light sleeper and would have immediately wakened if Nisso had cried out even once. But as he searched the orchard, Sho-Pir became more and more disturbed.

"I must go into the village in search of her," he said.

He hastened into his room, threw open the cupboard and took out his gun which lay wrapped in a rag. He hurriedly looked for his cartridge cases and wads and shook some gunpowder out of an old tin can onto the table. Since he had come to Siatang he had scarcely used this gun, which had been presented to him by the commander of his detachment. Sho-Pir himself did not realize why and where he was taking it now. His hands were trembling. . . .

When Gulriz appeared in the doorway and unexpectedly called his name, Sho-Pir did not turn around, realizing how pale he must be.

"Sho-Pir! I forgot! I know where she must be, the crazy girl! She went to the field—to our field on the mountain, to gather the wheat! She must have borrowed the frames from Saukh-Bogor. Go to the village and ask her."

Sho-Pir stifled an unexpected sigh and quickly placed his gun on the table.

"Could she really have gone there? Why did you let her?"

"I did not let her. I said, 'Do not think of going, and do not dare to go!' She may fall and be killed, Sho-Pir."

"If she falls she will certainly be killed," said Sho-Pir, but his tone expressed relief rather than alarm.

Gulriz was amazed to see that he was laughing. Sho-Pir felt discomfited by his own laughter, but now he was not ashamed to look Gulriz in the eyes. He knew that his face was calm.

"True enough, it would be an easy thing to slip up there. She is a brave little thing, isn't she, Gulriz?"

"She is crazy," frowned Gulriz. "As though it were not enough to worry about Baktior without having to think about her too. Look, there is snow on the mountain."

"When she gets back I shall give her a fine scolding, Naná." Sho-Pir gathered up his gun, the caps, cartridge cases, wads and gunpowder and put them away. "I shall go ask Saukh-Bogor now and then tend to my other business."

We must see that Baktior and Hudodod do not get stranded at the foot of the Pass."

"Yes, Sho-Pir. I am worried about him."

Sho-Pir left the house. For some reason he recalled the day when, unmindful of ruts and ditches, he had madly driven his truck loaded with Red Army men to his village in the hope of reaching it before the basmachi had had time to wreak their havoc. Yes, then he had been filled with a similar concern for his wife as he had pressed his foot down hard on the gas.

"I don't like it," concluded Sho-Pir as he approached the village. He strained his eyes toward the mountains to make out the tiny yellow patch, but this morning nothing could be seen but the glistening of the snow.

"There is a chance of her slipping on that snow, even if she can climb like a goat. She is a vixen of a girl all right!"

Wrenching his eyes from the mountain, he forced himself to think of Baktior.

6

When Sho-Pir left, Gulriz sat down and began to weave, but her attention kept wandering now to the slope down which Nisso had to bring her heavy load, now to the path along which Baktior might put in an appearance. Would he come or not? Would the donkeys be loaded or not? Yesterday Gulriz had shared her last measure of peas with Zuaida and had given Saukh-Bogor the bowl of millet flour from which she had planned to make pancakes for Baktior in case he returned empty-handed. Saukh-Bogor had said that her husband was going hunting in the morning, and would probably be in the mountains several days. But he might return without a single goat because he had only enough gunpowder for three shots and the merchant had refused to give anybody anything since the meeting. Sho-Pir had said "Give it to her," and she had done so, though it was her opinion that Issof could have lived on mulberries in the mountains. . . . But probably he had not gone hunting at all since the snow had fallen. What a pity she had given away the flour!

The heart of Gulriz was sore from days of anxious waiting. Today it ached with special insistence. The Pass was

blocked; everything was covered with snow. How fearful that snow was! The old woman thought of Nisso and of Baktior. She thought of what she had once confided to Sho-Pir. Perhaps she had done wrong in doing so. Perhaps it would have been better to have kept such thoughts to herself. But she could tell Sho-Pir anything. He had a great heart and would understand.

Gulriz was weaving a new woolen tunic for Nisso to wear in the winter. She wove carefully, as though for her son's betrothed; and thoughtfully, without raising her eyes either to the mountainside or to the path leading to the Pass. Suddenly she was startled by the distant braying of a donkey.

Throwing down her work, Gulriz shielded her eyes with her hand, the better to see the path. Her heart beat as strongly as that of a young girl as she made out her son coming along, driving an overloaded donkey before him. He was limping. Why should he be limping? But that was nothing! He was alive and coming home! Behind him walked Hudodod. But who was that third person riding the donkey alongside of Hudodod? He was dressed in foreign clothes, so it must be someone from other parts. But this was no time for curiosity! She smiled as she gazed at Baktior—her Baktior!

He was leaning on a long stick and his robe was unfastened and blew in the wind, which meant he must be hot. To be sure, one became hot from fast walking. The wind brought her the strains of a song—her son was singing his favourite song, which meant that everything must be all right!

The old woman did not get up, nor did she wave her hand; canyon-men were not accustomed to showing their feelings. She was inclined rather to assume a severe expression, but her heart was beating wildly.

He was already close at hand, driving the donkeys forward with an "Esh! Esh!" and she could already hear their hoofs striking against the stones. A white flower was thrust under his tubeteika. Where could he have found a white flower in the winter time! But he was limping badly. What could have happened? How long he must have been tramping over the trail! How tired he must be!

"Greetings, mother!" cried Baktior gaily with a nod of his head as he brought the donkeys to a halt in the yard. "Is everything all right?"

The old woman cast a quick glance at the stranger sitting on the donkey. Russian boots, green riding pants, an expensive sheepskin jacket, a cap with ear flaps such as Gulriz had never seen before. Was he a Russian? But it was not a "he" at all. It was a girl whose long black hair could be seen below her cap. Warily the girl slipped off the donkey and removed her luggage.

"Thanks to the Protector, everything is all right," said Gulriz to Baktior, as with trembling fingers she helped him to untie the ropes around the bursting packs. Gulriz was having jealous thoughts. "Why should Baktior have brought a girl with him? They had come together. Who could she be?" But at the same time she concluded, "Since she is a Russian, she cannot be for Baktior. She probably has come to Sho-Pir. That is all right, even very good."

As Gulriz continued untying the knots, she glanced at her son's feet. His shoes were in tatters and his toes were wrapped in rags. How his feet must pain him! How many sharp stones and how much snow he had had to cross on his journey!

"Why do you limp, my son?"

"A fool of a donkey fell on top of me. That one," said Baktior, pointing to a little beast belonging to Hudodod. The donkey's face was covered with blood, and there was blood on its hide.

"Nothing serious," laughed Hudodod, who had become skinnier than ever and whose lips were dry and cracked. "Good health to you, Gulriz!"

"Good health to you, Hudodod!" The old woman glanced from him to the lips of her son. They too were parched and split. And how sunken his eyes were!

Baktior turned to the girl, who was unhooking her sheepskin.

"Comrade Dauletova, this is my mother!" Then he added in a whisper to his mother, "She has come to work here. She will be our friend."

Gulriz wanted to say, "What work can there be here for a Russian girl? Maybe she is Sho-Pir's wife, though he never told us he had a wife." But the girl had already come over to Gulriz and was holding out her hand.

"Greetings to you, Gulriz! May happiness descend on your house!"

"How does she know our form of greeting if she is Russian? But she said that very nicely," thought Gulriz as she shyly held out her hand. Gulriz was not accustomed to shaking hands, and hers was unnaturally flexed.

"Thank you for your kind words," Gulriz felt uncomfortable in the presence of this newcomer with whom she did not know how to continue the conversation. She turned to her son. "Did the journey take long, Baktior?"

"The important thing is that we got here," he answered. "Sit down and have a rest, Comrade Dauletova."

"How long will you keep calling me that?" smiled Dauletova. "I asked you to call me Mariam."

"Very well, Mariam," muttered Baktior in some embarrassment.

He threw the first pack on the ground and pushed the donkey away with his fist. The beast immediately rolled over on its back, waving its hoofs in the air and straining to stretch and scratch its hot, sweaty back. Hudodod ran over and struck it with a stick to bring it back on its feet.

"Where is Sho-Pir?" asked Baktior.

"He went down into the village. He will be back any minute. But Nisso is up there," said Gulriz, pointing to the summit of the mountain. "She went away without asking permission."

"Went away? What do you mean, went away?" asked Baktior quickly. Gulriz searched his face for signs of a disturbed heart. His words came so fast that there must be something happening inside him, and a light kindled in Gulriz' kind eyes.

"She took the frames from Saukh-Bogor and went to bring down the wheat," she said reassuringly as she helped her son untie the pack. "What have you brought?" she added in a practical tone.

"Nisso should not have done that! It is too difficult!" Baktior glanced once more at the snow-covered mountain and his heart fell. But why should he let his mother guess his thoughts? "We have brought flour. And rice. We have brought Sho-Pir a little present—three tubeteikafuls of sugar, one tubeteikaful of Russian tobacco, another one of tea and a can of gunpowder. They are from the Russian commander; he turned out to be a good man. There were

many Russians there. And many Kirghiz, Uzbeks and Tajiks. Comrade Mariam is one of them," and Baktior nodded with a smile to Dauletova who was sitting on one of the packs. "Everything is different there. Mariam will tell you about it. It was a long journey, with much snow over the Pass."

Taking a mirror out of the pocket of her sheepskin, Dauletova pulled off her cap and examined her round wind-burned face with its high cheekbones and braided her tangled hair.

When Baktior had tied the unloaded donkeys to trees to make them stand quiet for a while, he said to Hudodod, "You may go now," and the latter hurried off to his house in the village.

"Where shall we put this stuff?" asked Baktior, but Gulriz advised him not to touch the packs until Sho-Pir arrived.

Baktior sank down on the felt mat which Gulriz had placed under a tree and invited Dauletova to sit down next to him. When Gulriz brought him a wooden bowl of sour milk, he first handed it to Dauletova. She took a few eager swallows, and handed it back to Baktior, who lifted it to his parched lips and drained it in one gulp. Gulriz was eager to hear all the details of the journey, but Baktior had already stretched out on the felt mat and his eyes were closing with weariness. Gulriz moved away so as not to disturb him. Baktior immediately fell asleep. Beside him, in her unfastened sheepskin, slept the newcomer.

Gulriz went into the house and returned with two pillows which she carefully placed under their heads. Then she knelt down beside her son and remained there without taking her eyes off his serene face and without moving, except to drive away a fly which had inexplicably put in its appearance.

7

The news of the arrival of the flour spread like lightning through the village. A number of people met Hudodod as he was hurrying home, and they rushed after him to get the news. But to their great disappointment, Hudodod had scarcely crossed his threshold when he fell asleep. Other inhabitants had seen the train of donkeys descend the zigzag path and disappear in Baktior's garden. Many of the canyonmen dropped their work and hastened there.

A crowd of people had already gathered at the stone wall by the time Sho-Pir reached home. No one dared break the accepted rules of etiquette by entering the garden or the orchard. But in their curiosity, they had climbed up on the wall and were discussing everything they saw.

"He has come! He has come!" they cried excitedly as they made way for Sho-Pir. "Baktior has come, and he has brought a woman with him—a Russian, it seems. She is sleeping."

"I know," said Sho-Pir with a wave of his hand, though in fact he knew nothing. He entered the gap in the wall and passed by the sleepers.

"Sh-h-h! Let them sleep," he said to Gulriz.

The old woman quickly told him all that she herself knew and was very much surprised when Sho-Pir said, after glancing into the face of Dauletova:

"I do not know her. She is not Russian—probably a Tajik."

In spite of his inquisitive observers, Sho-Pir examined the packs piled on the ground and began to sort them, figuring out their approximate weight. Then he had a look at the donkeys and decided to return them then and there to the owners who were crowding at the wall.

Sho-Pir untied the donkeys one by one and led them out. The owners rushed to meet them, and with the aid of uninvited volunteers felt their legs, ribs, and necks, sighing loudly and exclaiming that so long a journey had been very injurious to their beasts; that they had become mere bags of bones, and that their hoofs were all cracked. Knowing the canyon-men, Sho-Pir paid no attention to their complaints and rebukes; he continued leading out the donkeys until the only ones left were Hudodod's with the blood-spattered face, Baktior's with the broad ears, and two others whose owners had not come. The canyon-men demanded the return of the ropes and other paraphernalia which they had lent along with the donkeys, but Sho-Pir had placed all this in one pile and explained that in order to avoid misunderstanding, Baktior himself would return it on the following day.

Then Sho-Pir turned away and entered the house. He had figured correctly: convinced that there was nothing else

for them to watch, the canyon-men moved off in an animated discussion of this latest event.

Sho-Pir told Gulriz to take whatever she wished from the new products and to prepare a delicious and filling meal.

Nisso had not yet returned, and Sho-Pir kept glancing up at the slope down which she should descend as he sat next to the snoring Baktior writing out a list of the new supplies.

Sho-Pir was curious as to who the strange girl might be. He immediately recognized her as a Tajik; judging by her clothes, she came from the city. Her boots and sheepskin were of a military cut as were her quilted khaki pants. Why had she come here? Sho-Pir was bursting with curiosity, but Baktior and the girl were sleeping so soundly that he settled himself for a long wait.

Toward evening Dauletova awoke. She sat up, rubbed her eyes, and caught sight of Sho-Pir.

"Are you Comrade Medvedev?" she asked in Russian with a slight accent as she extended her hand, simply and cordially. "Or rather, are you the one who is called Sho-Pir in these parts? Regards from Shvetsov."

Sho-Pir gave her a handshake that made Dauletova quickly withdraw her fingers and wave them to ease the pain.

"Forgive me," said Sho-Pir in some embarrassment. "It was hearing your Russian that made me so enthusiastic. Shvetsov? Who is he?"

"The new second in command at the Volost garrison."

"I'm afraid I don't know him."

"He knows you. Your fame has spread far and wide."

"You don't say! And me hidden away here like a mole in the ground!"

"They know you very well at the Volost. And it seems to me you ought to know Shvetsov. Didn't you serve in Silkov's detachment?"

"Sure I did!"

"Shvetsov was also in that detachment. Have you forgotten him?"

Sho-Pir became excited.

"Wait a minute—Shvetsov? A lively little fellow?"

"Little as compared with you. Thin and middle-sized." Dauletova smiled. "The re-e-eds are wailing, tre-e-es are bending, da-a-ark and stormy is the night!"

"Jiminy!" exclaimed Sho-Pir joyfully. "So he's the one! Not a day passed but he sang that song! He played the accordion too. Wasn't his name Peter?"

"Yes. Peter Nikolayevich. I came here with him. He was the one who got me interested in these parts. For a long time he has been wanting to return."

"Good for him," thought Sho-Pir to himself. "Seems to be making his way up in the world." He wanted to continue this conversation about Shvetsov, but feeling that it would not be polite, he said, "So you have come here to work?"

"Yes. I'm a teacher. Where is your school?"

"School?" The question raised problems. "Where would we get a school?"

"You have no school?" asked Dauletova in some disappointment. "Well, it makes no difference. We shall call a meeting of *Komsomols** to discuss how to go about opening a school."

"Komsomols?" repeated Sho-Pir in even greater surprise. "It seems that you, Comrade—what is your name? Where would we get Komsomols?"

"So you have no Komsomols either?" Dauletova was no less surprised. "When the City Komsomol Committee sent me here they said—but I suppose—" Dauletova glanced at the encircling mountains, the village down in the valley, the orchards withered by the autumn winds. . . .

Baktior woke up at this point and made an effort to grasp what was being said.

"It looks as though I have really landed in a wild place," said Dauletova with a smile. "My name is Mariam."

"And your last name?"

"Dauletova. For a whole year I studied the Siatang language, thinking I would begin working with the Komsomols as soon as I arrived. Back there when I looked at the map and saw 'Siatang' I decided—but it seems—" Mariam blushed. "Don't think I am scared by a few difficulties. Only I didn't have a true picture of what it would be like. How do you manage here?"

"All right. Have a look: house, orchard, fellows like this for my friends." To cover his discomfiture Sho-Pir gave

* Komsomol—Young Communist League member.

Baktior such an unexpected slap on the knee that the latter jumped up and Dauletova burst out laughing.

"Do not worry, Baktior," said Sho-Pir in the Siatang dialect. "I am just explaining what a fine chap you are!" Once more he turned to Dauletova in Russian. "Once you've come here to live, you'll find out for your-self what it's like. We are building a Soviet way of life. Is that a revolver you have there?"

"They gave it to me in the city. They said anything might happen on our way through the Eastern Valleys. But I had no use for it."

"And you won't need it here either. It's not a bad little trinket, but you better take it off if you go into the village. They'll think you are not a woman. Tell me where that caravan has been for the last four months. We had just about given up all hope."

"We brought supplies for the whole region on four hundred camels. And you know camels! Everything was all right while we were going through the Eastern Valleys, but the Pass was blocked with snow near the Volost. Winter sets in there earlier and the snow was higher than that tree."

"I know. I've slugged through that snow myself. It snows there even in the summer. How did you manage to get through with the camels?"

"That's the point. The paths became so narrow we couldn't make any headway at all."

"In other words, you got stranded. At Salt Lake?"

"Just the place. Some of our people set out for the eastern border to get horses, but since there were disturbances there, they came back without them. For a whole month we waited at the foot of the Pass. The camels began dying off for lack of fodder. We lost ninety camels. We thought of turning back, but Shvetsov said that was not our style. And besides, snow had already fallen behind us. So we stored half our load under the cliffs to be called for in the spring and took a round-about trail. The detour added about two hundred kilometres to our route, but we got here as you see."

"Lots of fun."

"Plenty. A few other people came with us to work in Siatang: a fat doctor named Anufriev and a young Komsomol named Deikin to open up cooperative shops. People were

sent for all the large settlements, but when we reached the Volost most of them remained there. Some of them were sick, others decided to wait until spring to go to their appointed places."

"And you?"

"Me? I came along with your Baktior. That was my good luck. Deikin can't open up his shops without supplies and the doctor is too fat to go anywhere in the winter, even though he lost some weight on the road. He can't climb and is a bit of a coward. In other words, we can expect them in the spring."

"I can see you're a plucky young lady!" said Sho-Pir. "How did you get along with Baktior? Make friends? And can you speak the Siatang dialect?"

"Yes I can," and in a singsong voice Mariam recited a song well known throughout Siatang.

*"From path to path the mountain goat
Leaps as light as down.
The girl I love is lighter still
With eyes as black as coals."*

"Fine! Where did you learn it?"

"The District Committee dug up a couple of old men who had come from these parts. They taught me for a whole year. . . . But your Baktior. If it hadn't been for him I would never have reached here!"

Dauletova continued her account in the Siatang tongue so that Baktior could understand. Sho-Pir forgot everything else until Gulriz came to them at dusk and invited them to the felt mat under the plane tree on which she had placed all the clay and wooden dishes they possessed filled with wheat cakes, raisins, cream, sugar, and boiled rice.

"We should send for Hudodod," said Sho-Pir. "It has been a long time since he has seen a feast like this. Go get him, Baktior."

"To be sure. I shall have him here in just a minute. . . . What shall we do, Sho-Pir? It is getting dark already and Nisso is not back."

"Nisso? Ah, yes. Where could she be?"

"That is what I have been wondering," put in Gulriz. "You were so busy talking that you forgot, but I keep thinking that something must have happened to her."

At this very moment, as though she had been waiting for them to speak about her, Nisso appeared in the orchard carrying a terrific load on her back. She was hardly able to lift her little bare feet as she made her way through the trees whose branches caught at the sheaves of wheat covered with snow. The end of a loosened rope hung from the frames and dragged along the ground. Sho-Pir and Baktior jumped up and rushed toward the girl. Her head was bent and her face covered with matted hair. A mulberry branch caught at the frame, throwing her off her balance, and she fell on her knees buried under the sheaves.

Sho-Pir and Baktior quickly came to her aid, and from among the yellow wheat emerged a tousled black head. Nisso threw back her hair and all could see the exhaustion in her face, though her eyes were shining with joy and excitement.

"Here! I have brought you bread for ten days!" she said in a halting voice. "I did not think you would come today, Baktior."

Nisso was more chagrined than pleased by the abundance of food. Sho-Pir sensed this, and in an affectionate impulse he embraced her warmly, scarcely resisting the temptation to kiss her half-parted lips. Nisso did not draw back or drop her eyes; she was filled with pride. But Sho-Pir only ruffled her wet hair.

"You little panther! Who said you could go up there?"

"I am free to do what I wish! You said so yourself, Sho-Pir," she blurted out, but on catching sight of Dauletova, she stopped in embarrassment and ran quickly into the house.

"Just look! She is still capable of running!" laughed Sho-Pir. "Gulriz, bring her back. Now everything is fine and we can eat in peace. Humph!" he said rubbing his hands together. "Not a bad life we lead here!"

8

It was decided that while Baktior, Hudodod and Sho-Pir were building a school with quarters for the teacher, Mariam would live with Nisso in the new wing of Baktior's house. And there they would store all the supplies which Baktior had brought. Sho-Pir agreed to make wooden beds for the

girls the next day; that night they slept on the sacks of flour covered with felt mats and quilts.

The girls spent most of the night telling each other about themselves. The twenty-year-old Mariam decided to begin her teaching with Nisso, adapting herself to the latter's cultural level in the desire to become friends. Nisso was proud to feel as grown-up and experienced as her new acquaintance.

"In other words, you are just like me?" she concluded.

"Just like you—only I never ran away from Aziz-khon."

"That is because there are no Khans where you come from. But instead of that you almost starved to death."

"Yes, I would surely have died on the streets of Samarkand if they had not found me and sent me to a children's home."

"Tell me about the children's home and the streets of Samarkand."

Nisso listened without interrupting, but then she asked so many questions that Mariam said:

"Would it not be better if I told you about some one thing every day? There is so much to tell. What do you think?"

"All right." Nisso became thoughtful and then added:

"Do you mean to say you will receive money all the time for your work?"

"Of course."

"I also want to."

"You will if you learn how to do things."

"And do you mean to say you know how to read books?"

"Yes."

"I also want to. And you travel wherever you want to go?"

"Certainly."

"I also want to. How do you travel where you come from? Sho-Pir told me about what they call a machine. Have you ever traveled in one?"

"Yes I have."

"I want to do that especially! Tell me how you ride in them."

Mariam obediently began to describe automobiles, trains, and airplanes. Nisso finally interrupted:

"You are making it all up, like Sho-Pir! These are just fairy tales, but I also want to! Have you a husband?"

"No. I do not want to get married."

"Neither do I. Do you love any man?"

"No."

"I do!" exclaimed Nisso impulsively, suddenly catching herself and biting her finger in vexation.

Mariam smiled in the darkness and was about to ask who the man was, but then thought better of it.

"Let's go to sleep, Nisso."

"All right," agreed Nisso, but in spite of the silence that reigned thereafter, both of them lay awake for a long time. Mariam kept thinking that no one should ever find out her innermost feelings. Let the one who had left her in Samarkand wonder where she now was. Then she began wondering who could be the object of Nisso's love. Probably Baktior. But what could this child know about love? When she was—well, at least eighteen—then maybe she would realize what a wonderful and bitter feeling love was!

As Nisso lay gazing into the darkness, she kept thinking how foolish she had been to say what she had to Mariam. Never would she say it to anyone else! If only Mariam could understand how wonderful and how bitter love was!

9

The girls were still sleeping next morning when Sho-Pir and Baktior sat down to discuss how they would distribute the flour. Gulriz glanced into their room and decided not to waken them.

Once more Sho-Pir was sleeping in his own room. Having been the first to wake up, he dressed quickly and indulged in the luxury of a pipeful of the tobacco Baktior had brought him. Before washing or making himself tidy he sat down at his table and began making his calculations. The flour Baktior had brought was to be divided among thirty-two of the poorest families. Sho-Pir decided to give them two poods each for the three months before spring. With such a supply they could at least get along without starving and without living on dried herbs. Twenty poods were to be left as an emergency supply, along with eight poods of rice. The rice was to

be distributed only on holidays or as a reward for good work. When he had made out a list of the canyon-men who were to receive flour, he picked up a towel and headed for the stream, telling Gulriz to wake up Mariam and Nisso.

At the breakfast table he announced that he would distribute the flour that day. He read out the list and told Baktior to go to the village and tell the canyon-men they would receive the flour free of charge, but that they must bring with them their grain, which Baktior would store away until spring, when it would be returned to them for sowing.

"While you are gone I shall rig up some scales," said Sho-Pir. "You girls open up the sacks and divide the flour into equal parts. Then you can help me distribute it."

When Baktior had gone Sho-Pir added:

"Come on, we better get busy or those people will be coming before we are ready."

Nisso and Mariam went back to their room while Sho-Pir undertook making scales out of two of Gulriz' large wooden plates and a mulberry log selected from those in the yard for its thickness and evenness.

Nisso asked Sho-Pir to give her one of the two flags which ever since the meeting had been kept in Sho-Pir's room. "A good idea," said Sho-Pir and brought out the flag. Nisso and Mariam hung it above the door of their room, and then the happy, excited Nisso went to the porch and came back with a large knife.

"What is that for?" asked Mariam, who was bending over a sack of flour and had already managed to get herself completely powdered.

"To notch the post," said Nisso.

The first to arrive were two short canyon-men whom Nisso did not know. They brought with them neither grain nor sacks, but Sho-Pir told Mariam to give them each two poods.

"Why should we?" asked Nisso. "Where is their grain?"

"What a strict one you are! They have no grain and could not have any because they planted none. They worked on the canal and have only just received lots out on the wastelands. Give them the flour. But you must bring sacks," he added, turning to the canyon-men.

Since the scales were not yet ready, Sho-Pir made a mental

calculation of the weight of two of the sacks from which a third of the flour had been removed and lifted them onto the backs of the men. They went away with beaming faces.

Sho-Pir hurried away to finish the scales, leaving the girls alone.

The third to enter the room was Zuaida, with her donkey pushing its nose over her shoulder. The donkey pricked up its ears, and finding the dust not to its liking, turned and left, kicking at the doorjamb on its way out.

Everyone laughed. Zuaida stroked its crupper and pulled off two heavy sacks of grain which she dragged into the room.

"Put it over here," said Nisso. "This is where we shall pile the grain."

She helped Zuaida with the heavy sacks as she added, "See, Zuaida? You need not regret having raised your hand to help me. Now I shall pay you back with great riches."

And without consulting Mariam, giving her to understand that she could handle everything herself and wanted no interference, she calculated the weight of the sack with her eye, lifted it up, thumped it on the floor, and in the cloud of dust which arose said:

"Here, take it!"

The sack contained no less than three poods and Nisso knew this. Zuaida hesitated, but Nisso repeated, "Take it!" in a tone which brooked no refusal. Together they dragged it to the door. While Zuaida tied the sack to the donkey's back, Nisso hurried to a far corner of the room where the sugar and rice were stored. Taking a package which she had already prepared, Nisso went out with a sidelong glance at Mariam, who was standing with her back to Nisso.

"This is also for you, Zuaida!" said Nisso softly. "You have a good heart. Do not tell anyone; Sho-Pir would be angry with me. Come see me when you are not busy. I shall always be glad to have you as my guest."

Zuaida kissed Nisso, slapped the donkey and followed it down the path.

Nisso returned to the room and made three notches in the post in a businesslike manner.

No one else came for some time after that. Mariam and Nisso could not understand what was detaining the canyon-men.

When Sho-Pir had finished the scales he selected some stones to take the place of weights. Unexpectedly he came upon Kendiry on the other side of the wall. "I wonder why he is here?" thought Sho-Pir to himself. Kendiry climbed over the wall and came toward him. With a glance around to see that no one but Sho-Pir was observing him, Kendiry bowed with one hand on his breast and the other on his brow in the salutation used everywhere in the Orient excepting in Siatang.

"May you ever enjoy good health, respected Sho-Pir!"

"Hello," answered Sho-Pir without interrupting his selection of stones. "Have you come to see me?"

"With your permission, Sho-Pir," replied Kendiry. "I have something to say to you. May I speak to you out of reach of unwanted ears?"

"There are no unwanted ears here. Say what you have to say." Sho-Pir put aside his stones and glanced at Kendiry's robe and tubeteika and at his expressionless face. "Is it an important conversation?"

"For you it is important." Kendiry tried not to notice that Nisso was glancing through the door. "Would it not be better for us to enter the house?"

"Come ahead," agreed Sho-Pir. He got up and brushed the dirt off his hands and led Kendiry into the house.

Nisso stepped through the doorway, and caught sight of Fish Bones. Immediately she frowned and pursed her lips contemptuously. Fish Bones began to explain something to Mariam.

"So you have come! What do you want?" asked Nisso challengingly.

"Where is Sho-Pir?"

"Sho-Pir is not here at present," answered Nisso in a supercilious tone. "What did she say to you, Mariam?"

"She asked for flour."

"You too would like to receive flour?" asked Nisso.

"Give me some," answered Fish Bones dryly, turning pale with anger but struggling to keep herself in hand.

"No, I will not. You have no business here."

Mariam followed their conversation in some surprise. Both of them clenched their fists as though about to hurl themselves upon each other.

"Wait, Nisso," cried Mariam getting up. "Who is she?" Nisso retained a scornful silence.

"Who are you?" asked Mariam, turning to Fish Bones.

"Who are *you*?" shouted Fish Bones.

"I have come here to be a teacher. Calm yourself. Tell me your name and I shall look for it on the list."

"Her name is Fish Bones," shouted Nisso. "Can you not see that for yourself, Mariam? What other name could she have? Her name is not on the list. Sho-Pir read it out loud this morning and I remember. She does not get any flour."

"Nobody is speaking to you, you dead cat!" cried Fish Bones. "Do not listen to that good-for-nothing! Look on the list—I am Karashir's wife!"

"I can see that both of you are mad," said Dauletova taking up the list. "Stop it, Nisso! And you stop calling names! I do not know anything about your squabbles, but Karashir's name is on the list."

"Karashir, but not that snake! Where is Karashir? Where is his grain? They planted wheat. Give them nothing until they bring their grain."

Mariam looked helplessly at Karashir's wife.

"If you are Karashir's wife, why have you not brought your grain?"

Fish Bones stood silently biting her lips and throwing fierce glances at Nisso, while her face twitched painfully. She knew very well that when Baktior had come to their house he had said to Karashir, "Bring us your grain and you will receive flour." Karashir had wanted to confess everything, but had been afraid. Fish Bones ordered him to remain at home while she came here alone in the hope of somehow patching things up and getting Sho-Pir to give her flour. But it seemed that everything was in the hands of that wild-cat. How she would like to scratch her eyes out! But Fish Bones thought of her children. The merchant had deceived them; they could not hope to get anything from him. There was not a bit of flour at home, not the slightest bit, and the whole winter was before them! No, she could endure anything if only she got some flour! Fish Bones glanced through the door: the room was full of sacks—even the walls, even the floor was covered with flour—fine white wheaten flour. How many handfuls could be gathered just off the floor! All her anger

disappeared and her eyes expressed nothing but greed. Quite calm now, she said softly:

"I have no grain. . . . Give me some flour. . . . Just a little flour."

"What do you mean you have no grain!" cried Nisso wrathfully. "Do not believe her, Mariam! She has hidden it! She has grain! Look!" and Nisso turned sharply around and pointed to the village below. "See that house and that plot of land? There, the little patch to the right of the cliff? That is her land, and she harvested as much as anyone else. I will not give her anything. She is lying! When we asked for donkeys so that Baktior could go to the Volost, she chased us away."

Tears glistened in the eyes of Fish Bones.

"Give me some," she said softly.

"I will not!" said Nisso sharply.

"Wait, Nisso. . . . Let Sho-Pir say what we should do. We must wait for Sho-Pir."

"There is no reason why we should wait for Sho-Pir. He will say the same thing I do. Get out of here! Get out, do you hear, or I shall drive you away with stones!"

Fish Bones did not reply. She glanced at Nisso in hatred through her tears and turned slowly away, passing through the gap in the wall and disappearing behind the rocks. Nisso's obvious gloating surprised Dauletova.

"You are very hardhearted, and I doubt that you are in the right. She should have waited for Sho-Pir. With whom is he speaking so long?"

"You do not understand, Mariam!" blurted out Nisso, who had felt some pangs of conscience when Fish Bones had stopped shouting and begun to cry. Of course it was a good thing if she had been made to come down off her high horse, but it would have been better if she had not cried. "No," thought Nisso suppressing a sudden feeling of pity. "She is lying, and has got what is coming to her!"

"You asked me to whom Sho-Pir was talking, Mariam? His name is Kendiry. He is a very nice person—a barber—the merchant's assistant."

"But still I think I better ask Sho-Pir about that woman."

"Go ahead and ask. She wanted them to send me back to Aziz-Khon!"

"Ah, so that is the reason!" said Dauletova, glancing down the path to where Fish Bones was sitting on a stone. Apparently she had decided to wait there for Sho-Pir. Dauletova did not mention this to Nisso.

10

"As you know, I have been living here a year, Sho-Pir."

"A year, true enough."

"I live with the merchant, as you also know."

"Yes."

"You have never come to my shop—you always shave yourself. And I have never come to your house. Why do you suppose I have never come to talk to you?"

"You probably know that better than I do."

"I have come for that purpose now."

"It seems to have taken you a whole year to think up something to talk to me about?"

"Do not laugh. When I explain, you will understand. I have wandered much through the mountains; I have known many people and seen all different kinds of government. A wandering barber is not accustomed to talking with people in authority. In some countries they beat me; in other places they drove me away with stones, thinking I was a thief. For two years I was in jail in Kanjut. Do you know why?"

"How should I know?"

"They do not like the English in Kanjut. They like the Russians."

"Possibly."

"That is true. I shaved people on the square in Chalta. The news spread that I was a good barber. A soldier came and said: 'Come to the vizier and shave his beard.' Since I was ordered to do so, I went and began to shave him. He began to praise the English. I was foolish, and without thinking I said, 'Your people like the Russians.' One side of the vizier's face remained unshaved, and they threw me in jail. The jail was under the ground; spiders and snakes and scorpions crawled over us where we lay. They beat me with sticks—here is a scar on my cheek and another here on my forehead, and see, here is another." Kendiry opened the neck of his

robe to show the red scars on his breast. "Other prisoners died, but I remained alive. Then they drove me away from the jail. I came to Yakhbar a sick man, with the taste of death in my mouth. A man said to me: 'Come with me. You will have the great honour of shaving Aziz-khon.' I remembered Kanjut and knew what a great honour that was. I ran away. I came here. I began to live with the merchant Mirso-Hur. I lived with him a whole year and became his assistant and my heart was full of gratitude. I did not come to you and to Baktior. You were the people in authority. I remembered Kanjut and was afraid of people in authority. But for a whole year I watched you from a distance, and now I know that the people of Kanjut who praised the Russians were right, and that Soviet power is a just power. I did not know why you did not like the merchant. Now I understand. He is unworthy of your respect."

"What is the trouble? Have you quarreled with Mirso-Hur?"

"I have not quarreled with him. But a poor barber must choose the same path as the faqirs. The merchant goes another path. My face is ugly. Do not look at my face. Look at my heart. My heart is pure. Were you surprised by what I said at the meeting?"

"It seemed strange to hear you defending Nisso."

"The merchant called me a dog after the meeting. If the merchant had had the power, he would have thrown me in jail. The old men were surprised. They thought: 'Once the merchant's assistant speaks in such a way, it must be the way of the Preordained.' They all raised their hands in support of me. Now they hate me, but it is too late. Nisso remains here. Now do you understand why I spoke that way?"

"I cannot tell, Kendiry. If you are not lying. . . ."

"The Protector is my witness that I am not lying! Why should I lie, Sho-Pir? What profit would it bring me?"

"All right. But what is it you want to say?"

"This is what I want to say: the people here in Siatang are a savage lot. They have not yet seen anything. I have seen a great deal. Do you know what the merchant does to people? I know better than anyone else, even if I am only a simple barber."

Kendiry began to tell about the merchant's swindling while Sho-Pir listened attentively.

"Now I shall tell you the most important thing," continued Kendiry. "You wanted to arrange things in such a way that the canyon-men would have enough to eat all year round. But in spite of you the merchant has arranged matters so that the people will go hungry."

"Why should they go hungry?"

"Listen, Sho-Pir. The merchant said to everybody: 'The caravan will not come and there will not be any flour. Baktior and Sho-Pir are deceiving you. They have sold your grain to Soviet merchants; Baktior has gone to bring them here; they will come with guns and take your wheat. Go quietly to Bobo-Kalon before Baktior returns. He will open the mill to you so that you can grind your grain and make bread. Bring the rest to me, whom you have known for five years. I shall tell the Soviet merchants that you have given me your flour to pay your debts. The Soviet merchants will not take it from me because they know that Aziz-khon is backing me. They would rather go away empty-handed than quarrel with me. Whenever you need flour for bread, come to me and I shall give you as much as you need. Then in the spring I shall go to the lands belonging to Aziz-khon and bring back grain for sowing as I have done for the last five years. You will have flour to eat during the winter and grain to plant in the spring.' That is what the merchant said to them, do you understand, Sho-Pir? They have more faith in the merchant than in you: behind the merchant stands the Preordained; behind you stands its violation. They went to the mill and ground their grain at night so that you would not know. They handed over to the merchant all the grain they had no time to grind. Half the faqirs are now without grain. Yesterday Baktior came with the flour. He brought the flour you had promised them, and he brought no Soviet merchants with him, so the canyon-men realize that Mirso-Hur has played them a dirty trick. Now they believe you and are afraid that the merchant will leave Yakhbar and take all their grain with him. They fear this because the merchant has taken seventeen donkeys as payment for debts. He took them from those who did not give them to Baktior when he left for the flour. The merchant has prepared himself a caravan. I, Kendiry, have been liv-

ing in the mountains all these days—in Crooked Valley, up in the gorge—do you know where it is? There is still some grass to be found up there and the donkeys are grazing. Fool that I am, I am looking after those donkeys. I look after them and keep thinking to myself, 'It is a bad thing you are doing.' Every day I come down here and Mirso-Hur gives me more donkeys taken for debts and at night I drive them up to Crooked Valley. When I came down last night there was a regular panic in the village because Baktior had returned and brought flour, and some people would receive Soviet flour, while many would remain without either grain or donkeys, and the merchant would go away and probably never return, and what would they do in the spring when it was time to sow? In my foolishness I have done many bad things like bringing the merchant opium and obeying all his orders. But last night I thought: 'I am a just man by nature and what I do should also be just.' I want to be loyal to Soviet power. I want to be a simple man among simple people. And so I have come to you and told you everything. Every word I have said is true. The time has come when a person can live a decent life with a clean heart and clean hands. Go and check my words. Question everybody. I shall tell you who has no grain now and who has no donkey. Go to Ali-Mamat and to Sharim-Sho and to Issof and to Rakhim. Go to Karashir and to Haydar and to Muborak-Sho and to Radzhab, and to Bogadur and to Ali-Nur. There is nothing more for me to tell you. I ask you only one thing: I am afraid of the merchant's vengeance; let him not know of our conversation. The poor barber wishes only peace and quiet. He has a faith in you which he has never had in any other person in authority. Give me your promise."

"Very well, Kendiry," said Sho-Pir slowly. "I can promise you that for the present."

Once more placing the palm of one hand on his heart and the fingers of the other on his brow, Kendiry bowed and went away, leaving Sho-Pir in a quandary. While Kendiry had been speaking, Sho-Pir had listened attentively, without interrupting. At the same time he had studied the expression on the barber's face in an effort to guess whether he was as sincere as he seemed to be. Kendiry's eyes had been cold and his face expressionless. Not once had Sho-Pir found any-

thing in that face to win his sympathy. Yet his words had been convincing, and if it turned out that everything he had said was true. . . .

Could it be possible that the merchant had managed to cheat the canyon-men out of their donkeys and their grain and their flour? If Kendiry had spoken the truth, then immediate measures must be taken. The canyon-men could not have ground much of the grain, and whatever remained must be in the possession of the merchant. And if that were true, then with a single blow they might rid Siatang of the merchant's machinations for all time.

11

Sho-Pir rose, knocked the ashes out of his pipe, and went out on the porch.

"Have any more people come?" he asked.

Before anyone had time to answer, Fish Bones appeared through the gap in the wall. She came toward him half-running, with her hands pressed to her breast.

"Sho-Pir!" she cried, falling on her knees before him. "I shall die! My children will die! Do not listen to her, Sho-Pir!"

"What is this! Get up!" said Sho-Pir angrily. "What do you take me for, a Khan? Get up at once, I tell you!"

Fish Bones tried to hold on to his boots, but he lifted her to her feet.

"Stand up straight, do you hear me?"

Fish Bones stood there stifling her sobs with her hands.

"What is the trouble?"

"Nisso refused to give her flour," said Dauletova who was leaning against the doorjamb. "So she made a scene. She came without any grain."

Nisso ran out of the door at this minute.

"She called me a cat! She called me a thief! She called me a hireling! She refused to give Baktior her donkey and came without her grain! She is a filthy cow and there is no reason why you should give her any flour!"

Sho-Pir looked in amazement at Nisso's flaming face. In her fury Fish Bones forgot her tears and once more began shrieking and shouting curses at Nisso. Baffled by this violence,

Sho-Pir stepped back to wait until she should come to her senses.

"A bitter life, with never a gleam of light! May all of you be damned forever! What am I supposed to do—make soup out of stones? I have no grain, no donkey, nothing at all! Death is my lot, and that of my children! I shall go and crush their skulls! Let them die quickly! Let the black devils receive their souls!"

"Stop it!" cried Sho-Pir. "Be quiet! And you too, Nisso! Tell me this, Fish Bones—why have you no grain? Where is your grain?"

"She is lying! She has hidden it away!"

"Be quiet, Nisso!"

"May the Protector strike me dead if I am not telling the truth!" cried Fish Bones, wringing her hands. "I have no donkey and I have no grain."

"Where are they?"

"I do not know, woe is me! But they are gone, gone, gone!"

"Wait a second. You do not know, but I do. Did you give your donkey to Mirso-Hur? Do not be afraid. Tell me." The woman dropped her eyes.

"Well?"

"Yes," admitted Fish Bones after a struggle. "It was not I who gave it to him, but Karashir."

"I know that. Very well. And did either you or Karashir take your grain to the mill? Did you grind it? Did you give it to the merchant?"

"We took it to the mill. We did not grind it, nor did we give it to him—"

"Where is it?"

"Gone, Sho-Pir. Gone forever. Bobo-Kalon ordered them to pour it into the mill stream."

"What do you mean, pour it into the stream? Come, tell me all about it. Speak calmly. We are not your enemies, Fish Bones, and will not do anything to harm you."

Fish Bones began to talk, at first hesitantly, but then clearly and simply. When she had finished, Sho-Pir turned to Mariam and Nisso and said calmly but very seriously:

"Do you see what is going on here? While you, Nisso, and Fish Bones, keep on squabbling like a couple of trol-

lops, and I remain as blind as a fool! Do not worry, Fish Bones, your role is a minor one. Thank you for telling me the truth. Have you become wise to the merchant at last? Stop worrying and go home. You will get your flour all right. I have no time to give it to you now. But listen—do you want to get your donkey back? And your flour? And do you want Karashir to stop smoking opium? Do you want your children to be strong and healthy and to get enough to eat? And do you want to be decently clothed yourself? Do you want all this?”

“I shall kiss the footsteps of him who leads me along such a path!”

“The path is clear enough and it will not be necessary to kiss anybody’s footsteps. Just go into the village and tell everybody what the merchant has done to you. There are many who are as easily frightened as you are, hiding away like mice in dark corners. And tell everybody that I shall come and give back all the grain and all the donkeys that have been taken away, and tell them that all the faqirs will receive flour. Tell everybody that Sho-Pir has given his word for it. Now go.”

“But the flour, Sho-Pir?”

“Did you not hear me? You will receive everything if you do as I tell you. And do not fear the merchant. His day is over.”

Without raising her head, Fish Bones set off towards the gap in the wall.

Sho-Pir told Mariam and Nisso all that he knew about the latest manipulations of the merchant. While he was speaking Baktior appeared on the path, panting and waving the sleeves of the robe he had thrown about his shoulders. In an excited voice he began to tell them that the canyon-men were afraid to come for their flour because they had no grain and many of them had no donkeys. Baktior had become convinced of the truth of this as he had gone from house to house, and he also guessed where the grain and donkeys were.

“I know everything, Baktior,” interrupted Sho-Pir. “And this is what I have decided to do. You and I shall go down into the village now. The people are stirred up, and that is a good thing. We shall lead them to the merchant’s shop

and take back everything. If we let such a moment slip by, we shall never forgive ourselves.

"I shall go too," cried Nisso.

"Very well. But first you must pack two poods of flour on your donkey and take them to Fish Bones. Do you understand now how wrong you were to hate her as you did?"

"I understand, Sho-Pir."

"Then get going. Before we set out for the merchant's shop Fish Bones must be made to understand that I do not lie, and that my promises are not like the promises of Mirso-Hur. The whole village will know that you have brought her flour before you even reach her yard. And I am sending you on purpose, because I want you to make things up with Fish Bones. Close up shop here, Mariam. We shall not distribute any more flour today. Come on, Baktior!"

This was the quick, confident Sho-Pir who had once set out on battle assignments with his squadron knowing that success depended on self-assurance and enthusiasm and the exactness with which each Red Army man carried out orders. Once more he was experiencing that lightness of spirit and calm buoyancy which he had always felt when fighting the basmachi. Even his face was transformed by his mood, reflected in his compressed lips, slightly drawn brows, and the stern, frank glance of his shining grey-blue eyes.

Nisso was already driving her loaded donkey down the path. Dauletova was fastening the wooden lock on the heavy door of the girls' room.

"I shall come along too," she cried to Sho-Pir as he strode past.

"Why not? Come along," he replied in Russian.

Sho-Pir had guessed right. As soon as he entered the village he saw groups of excited canyon-men discussing what until then each of them had kept secret. It made no difference now—the authorities knew everything that had happened. Regardless of consequences, the faqirs were now sharing their doubts and apprehensions and expressing the hope that after all the authorities would give them some flour. Only now had the merchant's subtle system of extortion become

clear to them. Now they all realized the falseness of Mirso-Hur's tales about the caravan of so-called Soviet merchants who had bought up all their grain.

The followers of the Preordained wandered about the village pretending not to hear the testy remarks addressed to them as they passed the noisy groups of faqirs. "They will buzz a while and calm down," was their opinion. They had become used to such outbursts among the faqirs ever since the sayids, shanás and mirs had lost hold of the reins with which they had held in the people and a new form of power had come to this land. They concluded that the wrath of the people was like a sudden blast of wind in the gorge: give it the road and it would harmlessly expend itself, leaving peace and quiet in its wake.

Yet when Sho-Pir and Baktior appeared in the village, the followers of the Preordained realized that this time it would not harmlessly expend itself, and that they would do well to remain ignorant of what was about to happen by hurrying to their homes and shutting themselves up. But as Sho-Pir approached they felt that this time they could not quietly slip away, and that anyone who withdrew was sure to be considered guilty. They could only wait quietly, each one hoping that the wrath of those in authority would not fall on him.

Sho-Pir passed them by without so much as a glance. He went over and took a seat among the faqirs, to whom he spoke simply and cordially, as one speaks to friends. Immediately the tongues of the faqirs loosened up. They poured out all their grievances against the merchant, holding up their ragged clothes and poking each other in their protruding ribs.

"What are we to do, Sho-Pir?"

"We are nothing but beggars and we shall starve to death."

"Why should the merchant have deceived us?"

People kept coming out of the lanes and over the walls. They listened to what was being said from a distance, filled first with apprehension, then with hope. This was to be something important, and they must listen carefully!

The crowd grew around Sho-Pir and Baktior.

Sho-Pir understood everything without their bitter complaints and angry cries. He saw that indignation was grow-

ing, and he fanned the flames with terse, pointed sarcasm. He also noticed that some women had drifted into the crowd and were eagerly listening, while the men were too absorbed in their troubles to drive them away.

"Time for action," said Sho-Pir to himself, and jumped lightly up onto a stone wall. Steadying himself against the branch of a mulberry tree, he addressed the suddenly silent crowd:

"Until now you have been afraid. What have you been afraid of? Just see how strong you are! Who can prevent you from getting justice? Why were you taken in by the merchant's false promises like a fish on a hook? Year after year the merchant has taken everything from you—your grain, your berries and apples, your cattle and clothes. You slave half your lives away to pay him your debts, while he lives among you warming his hands on his belly. He is a thief and a swindler! Why has he all your grain? Why have you given him your donkeys? What are you afraid of? You are mere skin and bones and your children are dying of hunger. Enough of your empty words! Enough of your empty fears! You have no debts! You owe the merchant nothing! The grain he has stolen is yours! The donkeys he has stolen are yours! The wool from your sheep, the pelts from the foxes caught in your traps are all in the hands of the thieving merchant! Let us go and take back what he has stolen, giving to every man what belongs to him! Follow me!"

Sho-Pir jumped down from the wall, and with a nod to Baktior walked determinedly in the direction of the merchant's shop. The throng followed him silently, like an angry stream.

Seeing them approach, the merchant hurriedly left his shop, hoping to slip behind the house. But Sho-Pir cried out for him to wait.

Mirso-Hur stood with his hands crossed on his chest and his head lowered like a fuming but frightened bull, incapable of attacking. But this was only his external appearance. Actually his heart beat fainter and fainter until it seemed to stop with fright, keeping him glued to the spot. Sho-Pir went up to him and saw that his lips were trembling and that he was afraid to lift his eyes.

Kendiry appeared on the flat roof of the shop, from

where he looked down at the crowd. Sho-Pir had time to notice a smile in one corner of his mouth. Crossing his legs, he sat down on the roof in the calm, relaxed pose peculiar to Mohammedans at prayer.

"Well, Mirso-Hur," said Sho-Pir unhurriedly, "the time has come for the settlement of debts. Open up your shop. We shall not harm you if you give back all you have taken from the people. Where is the grain?"

The crowd encircled the shop. Uncertainly the merchant walked over and threw open the doors. The first person to flash past Sho-Pir was Nisso.

"Where are you going, Nisso?"

But Nisso had already plunged into the darkness of the shop and in a minute the crowd heard her calling:

"Here is the grain, Sho-Pir! Piled up to the very ceiling! And flour! You should see how much flour there is!"

13

A flickering red glow lighted the room in which Gulriz lived, while a crackling of brushwood came from the hearth. The corners of the room were shrouded in shadow, in whose depths could be vaguely discerned wooden shelves piled high with clay dishes and stone bunks on which blankets and goat skins were folded away.

Four smoke-begrimed pillars framed the hearth in the floor and the smoke hole in the roof, through which the stars twinkled whenever the smoke faded away. Baktior, Sho-Pir, Mariam, Nisso, Zuaida, Hudodod, Karashir and Fish Bones were sitting or lying about the hearth, while Gulriz, her face flushed, was kneeling at the fire. The guests had just finished a bowl of rice and were now waiting for the tea water to boil. Little by little Gulriz added milk to the water, stirring it with a long wooden spoon. Fish Bones was amazingly neat in a new homespun tunic, with her iron-grey hair combed into two thin braids. She sat looking lovingly down into the face of the child sleeping in her lap. The sight of this child had given Mariam a severe shock earlier in the day, when Karashir, splendid in a new robe, had ridden his donkey into Baktior's yard followed by Fish Bones with the child in her arms. The little one's face had been as black as

coal. Fish Bones explained that it had fallen down and cut its face on the stones, and she had applied a salve made of soot and mutton fat borrowed from a neighbour. After coaxing a reluctant consent from Fish Bones, Mariam had spent a whole hour removing this salve with cotton and vaseline. Now the child was sleeping peacefully in its mother's lap with only three nasty red scratches to mar the beauty of its serene little face.

The guests were in that pleasant state of relaxation when conversation is casual. No one wished to argue, for everyone was enjoying the shifting warmth of the fire and the cosiness peculiar to shadowy rooms. Baktior sat with his legs dangling over one of the bunks, strumming his lute and singing softly:

*My soul yearns towards thee. . . .
The mountain goat fled to thy dwelling
While I clutched my head, distraught!
Water rushes through the canal! Through the canal!
Vain are my efforts to find relief. . . .*

Everyone listened. Baktior half closed his eyes and saw no one but Nisso, who was sitting at the fire lost in thought, her hands crossed on her knees, her lips softly repeating the words of Baktior's song. Baktior was pleased that his song should move Nisso, and he continued full of confidence and inspiration. Nisso's gaze was fixed on her soft new boots, but her thoughts were far away. Perhaps she was again imagining those distant parts and that great life from which Sho-Pir and Mariam had come. Baktior would have liked to think that Nisso realized why he was singing that particular song, but he could not read her thoughts.

Sho-Pir was sprawling on the bunk with his old Red Army jacket unfastened. He was wearing the bright-coloured stockings which Nisso had presented to him that very day. He glanced thoughtfully at the profile of Zuaida who was leaning over the hearth listening, like everyone else, to Baktior's song. Her profile was delicate and severe, with a large forehead reflecting the play of the flames. Sho-Pir watched her disinterestedly, but Zuaida became conscious of his gaze and turned quickly around to see why he was staring so intently. Her full face proved to be less attractive;

the nose was too broad and the eyes too small. Sho-Pir shifted his gaze to the red and sweating face of Karashir, who was sitting propped up against one of the pillars with his eyes closed and an expression of utter contentment on his face. Warm and well-fed, he seemed to have drowsed off in the new white robe which made him seem completely black in contrast. Probably he had not been so comfortable in many years.

"Karashir is asleep," said Sho-Pir.

"No I am not," said Karashir, opening his eyes.

"How important he has become since he has donned his new robe!" laughed Sho-Pir.

"He is important enough now, all right, but he was as frolicsome as a puppy out there," put in Fish Bones.

"Where?" asked Sho-Pir.

"Did you not see him?"

"No. What did he do?"

Baktior silenced his lute.

"When Kendiry and Karashir and I brought the donkeys from (rooked Valley. . . ." he began.

"Well, what happened when you brought the donkeys?"

"I was not there either," said Nisso, rousing from her musing.

"You and Hudodod were hauling sacks out of the merchant's shop," continued Baktior. "Sho-Pir and Mariam were making a list of the goods out in front of the shop. Do you remember how all the canyon-men rushed out of the shop when we appeared with the donkeys?"

"I remained counting the sacks," said Sho-Pir.

"Yes, but I saw everything. The canyon-men all came rushing out, and in their excitement they even forgot to argue as to who should get what. Each of them began hugging his donkey. Karashir climbed up on his. . . ."

"Let me tell it!" cried Fish Bones. "He climbed up and I came running over. My donkey! I looked to see if it was whole. . . ."

"Looked!" mocked Karashir. "You hung on its neck and stroked its ears, crying all the while so that everybody laughed at you."

"I did not!"

"Yes you did. You screwed up your face and the tears ran down."

"What if they did?" Fish Bones put her hand over her husband's mouth. "Do not listen to him, Sho-Pir! I had given up all hope of ever seeing my donkey again. Issof also cried. Then he jumped up on its back and plunged around like a madman. My fool of a husband also wanted to plunge around, but the donkey refused to budge. Issof rode up to him and the two of them went for each other, each one trying to pull the other off his donkey. Everybody laughed at them. I thought to myself, 'My fool of a husband is the laughing-stock of the village.' But now look how important he is sitting over there!"

"Let him look important," said Sho-Pir. "Things are different for him now."

"Why?"

"Has he not a new robe? And his wife a new tunic? And the grain the canyon-men shared with him? He also has a sack of millet, and he will never smoke opium again."

"What makes you say that?" asked Baktior.

"Because when you went with him and Kendiry for the donkeys, leaving Nisso and Hudodod to empty the shop, they found the merchant's supply of opium. Where did you find it, Nisso?"

"In the corner under some rags. It was sewn up in two carpet bags. The merchant will not forget me for a long time! And that is good! He wanted to sell me to Aziz-khon! What shall I do with the stockings I knitted for him, Sho-Pir? Shall I give them to him?"

"Do you want to?"

"He gave me the wool. They are his stockings. It would be the honest thing to do."

"Then give them to him. Only—where do you suppose he got that wool?"

"We gave it to him," said Zuaida, touching Sho-Pir's knee. "I myself gave him the wool when I sheared my sheep."

"For nothing?" asked Fish Bones, placing her hand in front of her child's face to shield it from the fire.

"No. He promised to give me dyes."

"Did he give them to you?"

"He gave me back the wool and said, 'Make a robe out

of it and then I shall give you the dyes.' I made the robe and took it to him, but I never got the dyes or the wool back."

"When was that?" asked Sho-Pir.

"Last winter."

"So it turns out that you simply got back your own robe today."

"Not mine—another one. Do you know who got mine today? There it is on Hudodod. I recognized it as soon as Sho-Pir gave it to him."

"Who made mine?" asked Karashir, pursing his lips.

"This one?" asked Zuaida, feeling the stuff. "I do not know, but it must have been one of our women."

"What did you do with the opium, Sho-Pir?" asked Baktior.

"I remembered what you had done, Baktior. I swung the bags over my shoulder while everybody stepped aside to see what I would do. Following your example, I threw it in the river."

The wind whistled on the other side of the walls, and the smoke from the hearth, which had been rising in a steady stream, swirled down into the room, enveloping those who were sitting there. Everyone glanced up and saw that the stars were no longer visible through the smoke hole.

"The sky has become overclouded," said Sho-Pir.

"And it is very cold," added Gulriz.

"Where will you sleep tonight, Sho-Pir?" asked Nisso.

"In my own room as usual."

"You insist that Russian houses are better, but it seems to me they are worse."

"Why?"

"You have no hearth in your room, and two holes in the wall."

"You mean the windows?"

"Why should they be so big?"

"To let in the light."

"What will you do in the winter?"

"Board them up."

"Then it will be dark."

"That is because we have no glass as yet, Nisso. Did your caravan bring any glass, Mariam?"

"Yes, but we left it at the Volost."

"Then we will have it in the spring. Play something else for us, Baktior."

Baktior placed his fingers on the strings, twanged them once or twice, and began to play. And he sang as he played, bending his head over his instrument and looking at nobody. Hudodod pulled a flute out of his stocking and began to accompany him, pursing his lips and blowing out his thin cheeks. The flute whistled a plaintive melody, and every once in a while as Hudodod fingered the stops, he winked at Baktior to indicate that the latter should play faster or slower.

A sudden gust of wind blew open the door, drowning out the music and driving the smoke across the floor, making people involuntarily shut their eyes.

"What a win!" exclaimed Hudodod as he got up and closed the door.

"Tea is ready," said Gulriz when the smoke had cleared away and the fire had warmed the chilled air. "Will you drink our kind of tea, Sho-Pir?"

"With salt and fat and milk in it? No thank you, Gulriz! Just put a pinch of tea in that pitcher if the water has boiled."

"It boiled long ago."

"I too shall drink from that pitcher," said Mariam. "I am used to drinking tea with sugar."

Gulriz served all the others with the fat brew. Karashir burned his lips as he began to drink.

"Not enough," he said.

"Not enough what?"

"Salt."

Gulriz handed him a piece of pink rock salt which he dropped into his wooden bowl.

"Give me some sugar too."

"Sugar and salt?" exclaimed Sho-Pir.

"Of course," answered Karashir. "Times have changed."

"Do you find it good?" asked Sho-Pir with a grimace.

"Of course! Only the Khans ever drank such tea!"

Sho-Pir was the first to break the silence which followed.

"This is the last time we shall have such a feast. Tomorrow we shall distribute all the flour so that Nisso and

Mariam can fix up their room to live in. Gulriz and I will put away the sugar and rice and other supplies in the store-room. You must not touch them, Gulriz, nor allow anyone else to.

"It is a good thing the faqirs have brought us their grain, otherwise they might take it to the mill again," said Nisso thoughtfully. "Fish Bones will stay at home nights now."

"And perhaps you yourself will stop wandering around on mysterious business," frowned Fish Bones.

Sho-Pir raised his hand.

"Starting your bickering again?"

"We shall not quarrel any more," said Nisso seriously.

Another wild gust of wind blew open the door. The dishes clattered on the shelves, empty wooden bowls fell off the bunks and rolled across the floor, a goat skin hanging from the ceiling dropped on Mariam, while the flames of the fire struggled for breath.

"Snow! It is snowing!" cried Nisso.

The shrieking wind drove large flakes of snow through the door; others came through the smoke hole.

"Winter has come," cried Sho-Pir.

Everyone jumped up. "Close the smoke hole!" shouted Baktior.

"Bring in the cow!" cried Gulriz. "And the donkeys! Put some more stones on the clover!"

Baktior, Hudodod and Gulriz rushed to the door and out into the night which greeted them with a howl of wind. Those who remained inside were blinded by eddying smoke mixed with snow. Fish Bones wrapped her baby in the hem of her tunic and bent over to protect it from the cold. The snow entered in large flakes, twisting in the lurid smoke and hissing on the hearth.

Sho-Pir, Nisso and Karashir went out into the yard.

Now the darkness was filled with the mooing of the cow, the braying of donkeys, and the anxious calls of people. Somebody's steps sounded on the roof, and then the large wooden shield fell over the smoke hole, thrust into place with much bumping and scraping. Immediately the draught was cut off and Zuaida began to collect the wooden vessels scattered over the floor.

Gulriz and Nisso brought in the snowy cow and led it to the stall. Baktior struggled with two resisting sheep which he finally tugged and pushed into the stall alongside the cow, while Karashir and Hudodod drove both dazed donkeys into the house. The beasts stood motionless until they got a good whiff of the smoke, when they turned about and made a rush for the door. But Hudodod slipped the bolt and they were left standing muzzling the jamb.

The room had become damp and close. With the opening closed, the smoke stole lower and lower, making people's eyes water as they shook the snow off their clothes and huddled around the fire for warmth. Gulriz threw a pile of brush onto the fire, but the smoke was unbearable.

"Put out the fire," gasped Sho-Pir between fits of coughing. "Well, Nisso, do you still insist that Russian houses are worse? Incidentally. . . ."

Sho-Pir suddenly jumped up, ran out onto the porch and into his own room. The snow was entering freely through the open windows. He felt for the wooden shields he had long since made ready, and with the help of Baktior, who had followed him, fitted them over the windows. Then he opened the cupboard and felt for an oil lamp which he put on the table and lighted. He wiped the snow off the table with a towel as the wind roared more fiercely than ever outside. One by one the guests drifted into his room.

"Now Siatang is cut off from the rest of the world for a good long time," remarked Sho-Pir.

"I must be going home," said Fish Bones anxiously. "The children are alone."

"How can you go now?" asked Nisso. "Wait until the wind dies down."

"No, I must go," insisted Fish Bones. "Come, Karashir. Get the donkey."

"And I must go," said Hudodod.

"But you spend the night here, Zuaida. We shall sleep on the sacks in our room."

"Of course she will stay," said Sho-Pir.

"Very well," consented Zuaida.

Sho-Pir and Nisso went out onto the porch to see off their guests. The storm had increased, making it impossible to see an arm's length into the darkness.

At that very hour the merchant put out the light in his empty shop and left Siatang accompanied by Kendiry. For the thousandth time he muttered curses on this village and its inhabitants as he turned away.

He had decided to leave in spite of the storm, for he feared that the path to the Great River would be snowed over during the night and then he would be doomed to remain in Siatang for the winter.

Kendiry had tried to persuade the merchant to wait until the storm was over, but Mirso-Hur remained adamant. He was wearing two robes, a woolen turban, two pairs of fancy Siatang stockings, and mittens made of goat hair. Kendiry was similarly dressed. Both of them had large, overstuffed packs on their backs, to which were fastened blankets and three empty goat skins which they would need for crossing the Great River. At Mirso-Hur's belt hung a heavy bag containing gold dust and silver money—four hundred coins which he had just dug out of their hiding place in the ground. The travelers both carried long staffs. They stumbled under the weight of their loads and could scarcely retain their footing against the assaults of the wind. Soon they disappeared in the storm, which only the most extreme exigency could have forced anyone to brave.

As he felt for the path in the darkness, Mirso-Hur turned to hurl his last curse at the settlement hidden by the snow-storm. Kendiry smiled as he guessed, rather than heard the merchant's words.

Who can say what thoughts could have brought a smile to his lips at such a moment?





CHAPTER EIGHT

1

IT WOULD seem that nowhere in the world could there be such cold, icy winds, as in the Siatang canyon, some thousands of metres above sea level. Wherever one looked it seemed that a coverlet of the purest cotton had been spread over the slopes and summits, with black patches of overhanging cliffs offering the only relief to eyes exhausted by the dazzling whiteness. More often than not the whole visible world became enveloped in a slow, impenetrable fog which stole uncertainly through the icebound canyon.

The village was as isolated from the rest of the world as though held under a spell. The only sounds to be heard were the shrieking of conflicting winds, the rumble of the glaciers and the crashing of ice into the abyss.

How could the slightest heat be retained when there was not so much as a splinter of wood to be found, the only fuel being damp thorn bushes whose acrid smoke stung and blinded the eyes? What protection from the cold could there be when there was only one ragged blanket for the entire family, and no clothes but goat-skin robes worn over the naked body? How could the blood be warmed when there was a scarcity even of the hot water which the canyon-men thickened with a handful of flour for nourishment, and when the supply of dried mulberries was sure to give out before spring, however meagrely it was doled out.

The canyon-men did not pray. Their strange religion demanded no prayers of them. Formerly the pir had prayed for the entire village, in exchange for which it was necessary to give him only your last-born kid and anything else on which his covetous gaze rested during the day of sacrifice. God was far away. God took no interest in the prayers and

complaints of insignificant creatures. He listened only to the pirs, who alone knew how to converse with him. There were now no longer any pirs in Siatang, and the poor faqirs thought less and less of god, though the devs continued to dwell under the earth and in the waters of the river and in the restless clouds and in the winds which penetrated the poor stone hovels. The devs were invisible and awe-inspiring, threatening every canyon-man with unknown but anticipated disaster. Only the pure, flaming fire was free of devs; the true, harmless fire; the fire which was a friend to all the living; the sinless, unstained, hospitable, powerful and unconquerable fire. Fire devoured the villainy of the devs, broke evil spells, nourished the body and the soul and the mind. Fire was the provider and defender of man. Hail to the fire, bright and all-seeing, melodious and life-giving, undeceiving and many-faceted, warm and beautiful and worthy of contemplation! Fire! Fire! The hope, the comfort and joy of the patient, courageous canyon-men wintering in the wild ice-mountains!

Every inhabitant carefully guarded the little flame of life in his own hovel. Day and night the whole family huddled at the hearth. Children and grownups held their frozen hands toward it, stared into it silently for hours at a time, listening to its incomprehensible, many-tongued, speech, reading its vanishing script like a wise and wonderful book—the only book accessible to them.

The further the sun withdrew behind the cold fogs to seek rest from its summer's journey, the more precious became the least spark of fire. Let the acrid smoke fill the house, drying the throat and stinging the eyes! Nothing mattered but the preservation of the beneficent, many-horned fire! Nothing was hopeless, everything could be endured as long as the flames lived and danced. Sooner or later spring would come; the fogs would disperse; after its long winter's rest the sun would once more begin to restore life to the world. Rousing from winter's bitter hibernation, the inhabitants of Siatang would once more hear the many-toned song of the waters running down all the slopes and the cliffs and the crevices in the rocks. Gradually the reluctant snow would melt, emancipating the earth. The frail transparent mists would tremble in the warmth of the sun and

melt into the air. At last the canyon-men would say: "Now the sun has touched the Dog which has been freezing all winter, and already it is moving toward the toes of the Man. It is high time to forget about winter!"

And all the inhabitants would emerge from their hovels and meet outside for the first time since the setting in of winter. They would build great fires along the valley to purify themselves of the sins which had accumulated during the winter; they would sing songs and leap over the fires as their fire-worshipping ancestors had done a thousand years before. In the evening they would set out in the direction of the house in which Baktior and Sho-Pir lived and climb beyond it to where a spring gushed out of the rocks, there to wash themselves in the cold, pure water.

Perhaps many more years would pass before the ancient customs of the canyon-men would be forgotten along with their devs and the fear inspired by the mysteries of nature. But they would surely be forgotten, as they had already been forgotten in other remote corners of the land where the Soviet way of life enabled the individual to assume the image of Man—wise, proud, and fearless, triumphant over the darkness of preceding ages.

The winter is long in Siatang. No one can leave the village and no one can reach it. No matter what happens in the outside world, the people of Siatang must remain ignorant of it until spring. The winter would seem to be a dreary time. What could bring joy to the people? What could bring laughter to their lips?

Yet laughter and snatches of cheerful conversation were heard coming from the former shop of the merchant where the first school in Siatang had been opened. Mariam, Baktior and Nisso came there every morning, along with Zuaida, Hudodod and other young friends. They built a fire and seated themselves on rugs about it. Mariam had brought three books with her from the Volost: primers in arithmetic and writing and a book called *The Foundations of Leninism*. This last book proved to be the most interesting of the three. Mariam usually read a selection and then translated it or retold it to her listeners in her own words.

Now Nisso realized that what she had been told was not a mere fairy tale. She already knew so much that it

seemed to her she herself had been to Moscow and Lenin-grad and even to Baku—places where even Mariam had never been. On her breast Nisso wore a present received from Mariam—a tiny portrait of Lenin. No one else in Siatang had such a pin, and Nisso took just pride in it. Over and over again Baktior asked Nisso to repeat the story of how she had thrown herself into the jaws of Ashtar-i-Kalon. It was not for the sake of hearing once more what he had heard so often that he asked, but that all the canyon-men might join Nisso in laughing at her former superstitions. And also that he might watch Nisso's laughing mouth—so pure and so unapproachable! Nisso's friends would recount other remarkable events in the life of their village, and they would ask Mariam which explanations were true ones and which were just the inventions of the old men.

One day a solemn silence reigned in the schoolroom. After much persuasion on the part of Mariam, Zuaida had been the first to risk bringing her little kid here and tying it to the door so that in front of everybody she might unfasten the triangular leather amulet which hung around its neck. With the amulet in her hand, she returned to her place at the fire.

Every canyon-man wore such an amulet around his neck or under his arm or at his elbow. Formerly they had been sold by the pirs, but of late had been brought from Yakhbar by the merchant. They were also hung around the necks of cattle to protect them from the evil eye, from devils and death and sickness and misfortune. Who would ever dare bring disaster to an animal by taking off its amulet? Who would ever dare defy the magic powers contained within this triangle of leather by touching it?

Mariam took a knife from Baktior while everyone watched with bated breath.

"Now we shall see whether your kid will die or not, Zuaida," said Mariam as she ripped open the amulet.

She took out and unfolded the narrow strip of yellow paper containing mysterious signs printed by some unknown press.

The paper passed from hand to hand and was returned to Mariam.

"How much did you pay the merchant for that, Zuaida?"

Zuaida said that the amulet had been bought by her dead mother long before the appearance of the merchant in Siatang, and it seemed that she had paid the pir three chickens for it. Glancing timorously at the mysterious signs, Zuaida added quietly that she no longer had any fear and no matter what happened, even if her kid should die, she would not take back her words.

"Throw it into the fire, Mariam."

"You throw it in," smiled Mariam.

"No, you—" whispered Zuaida.

"All right. I shall tear it in half: you throw in half and I shall throw in the other half."

But Zuaida hung back and kept prolonging the operation until Nisso thrust out her hand and said, "Let me throw it in, Mariam!"

Nisso threw her half into the very centre of the fire. Nervous, expectant glances were cast in the direction of the kid. Mariam burst into a laugh when she heard Zuaida's long-drawn sigh, but nobody else joined her; possibly the kid would take some time to die.

For a whole week thereafter Zuaida's friends kept bringing bunches of clover and handfuls of flour and dried berries to bolster up the health of the kid. It would be a great pity if it should die! But the kid did not even fall ill and Zuaida could report only that it was getting exceedingly fat.

One morning Mariam suggested that they all take off their amulets and throw them into the fire. Some protested that it was a bit too early, but when Mariam laughed at them they consented. After first agreeing not to tell anyone about their secret decision, they took off their amulets and burned them up.

Each of them was filled with secret apprehension as he left the schoolhouse that day. But when in the course of the next few days nothing changed in their lives, they laughed together over their fears and at the canyon-men who refused to part with the foolish trinkets until their dying day.

"What else must I do to become a Komsomol like you, Mariam?" asked Nisso. "It seems to me that we are already Komsomols."

"Oh no, Nisso. It is not as simple as all that," answered Mariam. "There is much that you must yet learn. We shall wait until our comrades come from the Volost in the spring. They will talk with you to find out what you think and what you know, and on the basis of that decide whether you have done everything possible to make yourselves worthy of becoming Komsomols."

"I don't understand you, Mariam. You say that a Komsomol is one who can try his hand at anything, who does everything in a new way, who is not afraid of devs, who tries to make life better for everybody, who is not afraid to go against the Preordained even under the very eyes of Bobo-Kalon, who does not believe that the sun will stop shining and knows that there is no god, who does not doctor sores with soot and mutton fat but with the medicines you brought. Is that right, Mariam?"

"Yes."

"Tell me, Baktior, are we not like that? Tell me, Zuaida, are you not like that? And you, Hudodod? And all of you sitting here? We are not afraid of anything and will do whatever is asked of us. Are we not the same as you are, Mariam? Why do you say that we are not yet Komsomols?"

In some discomfiture Mariam again began to tell them about the Komsomol organization in her native town. And once more began a discussion which made everyone forget the howling of the wind outside. They sat talking, unmindful of hunger or thirst, until darkness set in; they continued even when the fuel gave out and the fire died down. It seemed to them that the world no longer held any mysteries, and that they could learn everything, once they mastered the primer so that they could read books and write with coals on birch bark as simply and easily as Mariam and Sho-Pir.

Every day gave rise to new discussions in the school. To the first twelve pupils were soon added several more young men and two girls—fourteen-year-old Tufa and Nafiz, friends of Zuaida who had talked their fathers into allowing them to attend the school. Their fathers were poor faqirs who had been given lots out on the wastelands that autumn. They refused to give their consent until Sho-Pir had a heart-to-heart talk with each of them, a talk which he supplemented with a gift of five tubeteikafuls of rice.

"Very well, you may go." they had told their daughters at last, "but do not dare to take off your amulets."

Karashir had accompanied Baktior to the school several times. After the disappearance of the merchant, he had approached Sho-Pir once or twice and begged him shamefacedly to get him even one little pinch of opium, swearing that he would surely die without it.—His belly ached, his bowels were loose, he could not raise an arm or a leg. In general he was in a bad way. Sho-Pir only laughed at him, but Karashir actually became ill. For several days Mariam treated him with the medicines she had brought and he gradually recovered. He no longer asked for opium, and fresh colour came to his cheeks. He began to wash himself with cold water every morning. Whenever he visited Sho-Pir and Baktior he would laugh and joke and amuse them with tall stories which he proved to have a gift for inventing. The new robe made him carry himself proudly. Karashir claimed that he must be a sayid rather than a faqir, once he wore a robe with such long sleeves. Everyone knew that Fish Bones had stopped beating her husband, though she continued to shout at him as much as ever. When Karashir learned from Nisso that they were discussing how to make life happy for everybody, he asked to be allowed to attend the school.

The first time he took his place in the circle of young people and sat there scratching his beard, everyone was inclined to laugh. But Mariam cut short the laughter with thunderous looks. Without understanding a word of what was being said, Karashir sat silent and sedate upon the rug, and when he left in the evening he said that he intended to come every day.

Soon they ceased to notice him. Usually he did not open his mouth during the lessons, but he listened thoughtfully and attentively, and one day he surprised them all. Mariam had just asked them to write a short sentence on the birch bark. Suddenly Karashir took Hudodod's bark out of his hand and in shaky letters wrote: "I, Karashir, am a Kom-somol." Proudly he handed it to Mariam.

Mariam read it out loud and everyone laughed and pointed to Karashir's beard. But Mariam called them to order and gave him a friendly hug.

"Good for you," she said. "Good for you indeed. If you like, I shall work with you separately. Just see how well he has learned to write!"

Karashir could not hide his delight as he glanced around at the silenced young people.

"Of course I should like to," he said. "I shall be the first to write a letter to Moscow! Soon I shall have a lot of bread, and then I shall invite all Moscow to come and visit me!"

Karashir's words called forth a fresh outburst of laughter, but he was not offended and glanced about with shining eyes.

From that day on Karashir began to speak up during the lessons, and his jokes sometimes interfered with the teaching. But he did not part with his amulet, and when Nisso once suggested that it would be a good thing if he followed the example of the others, he became angry and said:

"Everyone has his own head, and I have my own devs. I shall do with them whatever I like, and it is not for a stupid woman like you, Nisso, to teach me!"

Thus the house which had belonged to the merchant became distinguished from all the other houses in Siatang. It seemed to be the only one in the village which the dreary winter, noisy with the wailing of snow-devs, could not penetrate.

2

Had Baktior been more confident in himself, he would long since have given expression to his feelings. But he did not know what was allowed him and what was forbidden. However bold and resolute he showed himself to be in his dealings with other people, he was painfully shy with the domineering, unfathomable Nisso. He could not overcome the desire to be with her all the time, though he dared make no declaration of his feelings. His being with her required no effort on his part, for Nisso's life was spent only at home and at school: there was nowhere else to go during the winter. Nisso and Baktior always walked the short path between home and school together. Yet the occasions were rare when he could be alone with her, for Mariam usually accompanied

them. But even had she not, the wind blew with such force that there was little chance to carry on a conversation.

At school Nisso became completely absorbed in her studies while Baktior sat watching her, sometimes oblivious of Mariam's explanations. As a result, Nisso far outstripped him.

When they returned home Nisso always sought the company of Sho-Pir. "That is only natural," thought Baktior. "Everything that Sho-Pir tells her is interesting because he knows so much. If I knew so much everyone would listen to me too." He worshipped Sho-Pir, considering him superior to anyone else on earth. He admired his strength, his knowledge, and his authority, and he became hostile towards anyone who looked upon his friend otherwise. It is true that at first he watched him closely to see that he did not cast significant glances at Nisso or touch her hand or take her aside to speak to her. But it seemed that Sho-Pir was a particular kind of person who took no interest in women.

And when Sho-Pir insisted that he was not a great person, but that beyond the mountains could indeed be found great and wise and learned people, Baktior could not imagine what those people must be like. Once, in a confidential mood, Baktior raised the question, but Sho-Pir only laughed good-naturedly and said:

"Some day you yourself will become wise and learned, Baktior—as great as the people beyond the mountains. And then I am afraid you will forget all about me, or if you remember me it will merely be to say, 'Once I lived in a remote canyon called Siatang and there I had a friend who was not a bad chap, but whom in my ignorance I thought to be very clever.' And you will have a good laugh about it."

"You are wrong to joke," said Baktior angrily. "If you say the word I shall cut out my heart with this knife and then you will see whether it is true or false."

"That would be a crazy thing to do. Who wants your heart? It would be more sensible to take your primer and show me how much Mariam has taught you. Then we shall see whether you listen to my every word as you claim to do. You are already twenty years old, Baktior, and still you cannot read."

Baktior was offended and turned away. But a while later he returned with his book and read by syllables, haltingly and blushing with shame. When he finished he insisted that next time he would read fluently and without mistakes.

How could he be jealous of Sho-Pir? Nisso also wanted Sho-Pir to praise her fluent reading. She too wanted him to teach her how to make people happy. She too kept thinking about those great people beyond the mountains and wanted him to tell her all about them. What if she did look at him in that strange way? Was it possible to have a different attitude towards Sho-Pir?

How fine everything had turned out! Here was a girl like Nisso living in his own house, under his own roof. And she spoke very simply with him, without putting on airs, and none of the other men in the village spent their time with her. If it were not for Soviet power, the canyon-men would surely have sent her back to Aziz-khon and then Baktior could never have dreamed of making her his wife. She had neither mother nor father, so there was no one whose permission was required. And he need not think of her price, for there was no one to pay, though Baktior would gladly have paid a thousand sheep for Nisso if he had owned a flock.

And still he could not marry her if she did not love him and did not want to. How could he find out without asking her? He was willing to do anything in the world but ask such a question. He could never make his tongue pronounce the words. And maybe Nisso did not guess that he loved her.

Now they were climbing down the path with a fierce wind in their faces. Nisso said, "I am cold, Baktior." He slipped off his robe and threw it over her head and shoulders so that the only part of her which could be seen was a bit of brown calf showing above the cuff of her woolen stockings. Crossing his arms on his chest, he followed her through the storm in his shirt and full white pants. Nisso probably did not realize that he was cold. But actually he did not feel cold. He felt wonderful, for it was *his* robe in which she was so comfortably wrapped up. Did she love him? Did she not? . . .

Now they were sitting by the fire while Nisso sewed a large patch on his torn sleeve. Formerly Gulriz had patched

his things, but at her own suggestion Nisso now did this. The fire was roaring, and Nisso's fingers were flashing in and out like little tongues of flame—probably just as hot as the flames. He would like to take those fingers in his own hand and hold them to his breast so that she could hear how his heart was pounding. But he could never do that! He could only look at her fingers and at her face framed in tousled braids as she bent over her task. Would she look up at him, or would she continue to sit there lost in thought? Of what was she thinking? Of what? He could never guess. Let her think whatever she liked so long as she kept on patching his sleeve; so long as she did not move her carelessly crossed leg which, unknown to herself, was slightly touching his hand. Once she finished, she would turn to him with her pure, clear gaze and say in friendly fashion:

"There, I have sewn it fast, Baktior, and please do not rip it any more. I am sick and tired of mending your things. Even Sho-Pir says you are very careless."

Then everything would be over and he would have to get up and go away. But the fact remained that she did his patching for him. Did she love him? Did she not? . . .

Now it was late in the evening and he was going to the new room occupied by Nisso and Mariam. The girls were not yet asleep; they were talking about something or other. It was amazing the number of things women could find to talk about!

"I should like to ask you a question, Mariam," he said, pulling a worn book out from under his robe. 'The salesman cut fifteen and three quarters of a metre of cloth into three even parts.' Will that be five and a half metres each?"

He knew that Mariam would be angry with him, but let her think he was so stupid. The only thing he wanted was to stay there long enough to make sure that Nisso's eyes were the same as ever. Would she say a kind word to him in parting for the night, or simply yawn and remain silent?

He himself would not say a word to her. Let her not think he had come for the sake of seeing her! If Nisso spoke to him, that would mean that she loved him. If she remained silent, probably she did not.

How could he tell Nisso what had occupied all his thoughts throughout that endless winter? He could never broach the

subject to her. It was strange how thoughts could make a man dizzy and deprive him of sleep. Formerly Baktior had never known a sleepless night.

One evening when Nisso and Mariam had gone to visit Fish Bones, the tortured Baktior resolved to tell Sho-Pir everything and ask for his help. He went to Sho-Pir's room and stopped in the doorway. Sho-Pir was sitting at his table enveloped in tobacco smoke and reading the same book Mariam translated for them at their lessons.

"What is it, Baktior?" said Sho-Pir turning around.

"Nothing in particular. I just thought I would drop in." Baktior tiptoed over to the table and sat on a stool next to Sho-Pir. Sensing that the latter was absorbed in his reading, Baktior began to carve a goat on the table.

"What are you doing?" asked Sho-Pir at last, looking up from his book. "You mustn't spoil the table."

"I am thinking—"

"Of what?"

"You are a great man, Sho-Pir. The bright side of your heart is always turned towards me, is that not so?"

Sho-Pir closed his book. Once Baktior had addressed him in such pompous words, he must have something important on his mind.

"Hm-m. Apparently you find my heart to be something like a moon."

"Why like a moon?" asked Baktior, missing the point. Then he continued falteringly, abashed by the fine phrases he had planned to speak. "When your soul is weighed down by ice—like the summits of the mountains—um-m—then is it not winter in your soul? And can you be sure that the sun will return?"

"In Russian we say 'Cats are clawing at your soul.' Is that what you mean?"

"Yes, yes!" agreed Baktior, happy at being understood. "Only not cats, but panthers."

"All right—panthers. But what is the trouble? Speak up."

"It is a great trouble."

"Really so great?"

"I do not know whether I should tell you or not."

"What the devil can it be? Out with it!"

"To speak frankly—" Baktior hung his head. "I am afraid I am going crazy. Tell Nisso to marry me, Sho-Pir."

Sho-Pir choked on his pipe-smoke. He had long ago anticipated the inevitable conversation about Baktior's marriage, though Baktior himself had not revealed his intentions. But Sho-Pir had prepared himself. He had made his decision long ago, and once the decision was made he had not betrayed his secret feelings by a single glance or gesture. Any other decision would mean forfeiting the friendship and confidence of Baktior, the hopes of Gulriz, and even his own dream of founding the first Soviet family in Siatang. Unquestionably he would have expressed his satisfaction if everything had worked out of its own accord between Nisso and Baktior. But under the circumstances—was there no avoiding this new trial?

"So you have decided to get married?" asked Sho-Pir, taking a long draw on his pipe.

"I think it would be a good thing."

"Of course it would be a good thing. It is high time. Perhaps Nisso is still too young, but she can wait. Let everyone know that she is to become your wife. Is she happy?"

Baktior did not know what to answer.

"You tell her, Sho-Pir. I beg of you. I do not know whether she is glad or not."

"You are not a merchant or a Khan to buy a wife without asking her consent. Has she told you that she is willing?"

"You do not understand anything today, Sho-Pir!" exclaimed Baktior irritably. "I have not asked her. You ask her. If I ask her she will say no, but she would not dare say no to you."

"What a blockhead you are, Baktior! As though other people could decide such matters for you! Tell me frankly—do you love her?"

"I think I must love her."

"And does she love you?"

"I do not know."

"Then go and find out."

"How can I find out?" wailed Baktior miserably. Sho-Pir frowned.

"Listen, Baktior. It is clear that there is something wrong with your head. Do you want to be my friend? Then

as your friend I demand that you go to her today and ask her. Be a man! Say: 'Nisso, do you want to be my wife?' Then come and tell me her answer. If you do not ask her today I shall not speak to you. That is all. Go ahead."

Baktior left unhappy, feeling incapable of coping with the task facing him and cursing his stupidity, as a result of which Sho-Pir had become angry with him. Sho-Pir remained sitting at the table smoking one pipe after another until the smoke in the room became thick enough to cut with a knife.

That evening he irritably blew out the lamp and went to bed without any supper. Baktior did not show up.

The next morning a red-eyed Nisso tiptoed into Sho-Pir's room, but seeing his head under the blanket, she turned to go out.

"Is that you, Baktior?" asked Sho-Pir from under the blanket.

"It is me," said Nisso softly, standing in the doorway with her back to Sho-Pir.

"You, Nisso?" Sho-Pir quickly threw the covers off his face. "What is it?"

"Tell me, Sho-Pir, would it be right for me to marry Baktior?" asked Nisso brusquely, without turning around.

"Of course, Nisso. He is a fine person."

"Do not speak of him. Speak of me. Would it be the right thing for me to do?"

"I think so."

"Sho-Pir," said the girl with trembling lips, "is it *you* who says that?" Nisso placed all the weight of her emphasis on that "you."

Sho-Pir understood everything.

But he could not retreat, though he had difficulty in replying.

"Of course. Baktior loves—"

"Say nothing else! Now I know everything," interrupted Nisso and ran out of the room.

A few minutes later a beaming Baktior came to tell Sho-Pir that Nisso had just consented to marry him.

Sho-Pir sat on the bed and gave Baktior's hand a strong squeeze.

"Well, Baktior, now you are a real man! Congratulations!"

At last came the spring. The sun moved from the Dog to the toes of the Man, and proceeded in three-day jumps to his knee. The people of Siatang greeted the spring according to ancient custom. They leaped over bonfires and washed in the spring, they stuck burning brands in the doorjambs of their houses to ward off evil devs, they painted the walls of their houses with the remains of the winter's supply of flour. Vari-coloured circles and squares with crosses inside symbolized bursting larders; fat bright dots indicated flocks of sheep and goats, while trees and birds and the sun were also drawn upon the walls.

The canyon-men went out into the fields and dug up the moist earth under the rocks, throwing it upon the snow to hasten its melting. They cleared the fields and the irrigation ditches of the stones which shifting snow had left in its wake. They brought basketfuls of manure which they scattered in even layers over the fields. They dressed themselves in fresh underwear and robes cleaned with snow, and on the given day they dyed eggs and rapped them one against the other to determine whose wish would be fulfilled, just as the Russians used to do at Easter time. They repaired their ploughs made of the horns of goats. They brought their lean oxen out of the dark sheds where they had wintered, let them slowly up and down the yard and placed yokes on their necks.

Day by day they made ready for the great Spring Festival, when the first furrow should be ploughed. Even those who had had almost nothing to eat during the last days of winter, kept a supply of mulberries, flour, butter and cheese for this holiday, for they believed that the coming year would be lucky for those who met this holiday clean, well-fed, and in a merry mood.

Formerly, when the sayids, mirs and akobirs had owned horses, races had been held on that day. Only Siatang horses were capable of racing over the sharp stones of the wastelands. And only the sayids, mirs and akobirs could be so heartless as to race horses over such ground. They began preparations for the races long before the holiday. Wrapping the horses in blankets, they kept them walking day

and night without stopping. The horses became spiritless and stopped neighing. They rolled their dilated eyes and could scarcely lift their hoofs off the ground. A horse was considered completely "cold" and ready for the races only when it could no longer step over a whip thrown across its path. At the last moment they beat it mercilessly in the presence of impartial judges and pricked it with a knife until, in the despair preceding death, the beast broke into a wild flight across the wastelands. In most cases this was the last service it ever rendered its savage, vainglorious owner.

Ever since the sayids, mirs and akobirs had crossed the Great River, taking all the horses with them, there had been no races at the Spring Festival. But other forms of amusement remained. There were still archery contests in which the participants aimed at an apple placed on top of a post; there were still dances and drum beating and flights through the air on giant swings, and wrestling matches in which the contestants were bound with ropes. Once their long winter's nap was over, the people of Siatang made eager preparations for these games and dances and the feasting which accompanied them.

Long before the holiday the canyon-men whittled birch wands, leaving some of the shavings attached. It was the custom to visit one's friends during the holiday and present the mistress of the house with a bunch of such wands, saying, as they waved them, "I congratulate you on the coming of spring," to which she would reply, "I congratulate you also." As she accepted the wands from his hand, she would sprinkle flour on her visitor's right shoulder, and he would then watch the mistress of the house thrust the wands in places designated on the wall. Every wand had its own meaning: if it were entirely stripped of bark, it meant that the guest wished his hostess a fine harvest of wheat; if the bark hung in strips from the wand, he wished her a harvest of rye; if the bark remained intact, he wished her a harvest of millet.

On that day anyone with a request to make of his neighbour would tie a bit of holiday cake into his turban, and then climb up on the roof to the smoke hole, where he would unwind his turban and lower the cake down into the hands of the one to whom the request was to be addressed. Many

unsuccessful suitors resorted to this last hope of being accepted, for often stern parents relented on the occasion of the holiday.

Baktior impatiently awaited the Spring Festival, for on that day he planned to announce his engagement to Nisso. Gulriz had asked her son to do this, so that the pledging of their troth would be celebrated by everyone. To be sure, the couple could not be married for some time thereafter, for Sho-Pir claimed that Nisso was not yet old enough. But once their troth was pledged, there would be no more vicious gossip about Nisso's living in Baktior's house.

The sun rose higher and higher during those bright clear days. Soon the roads and passes over the mountains would be opened up. The first to be opened was always the road to the Siatang canyon. The Soviet caravan (part of the great caravan which had wintered at the Volost) would climb this trail from the Great River to Siatang. Sho-Pir and Mariam kept telling the canyon-men of the riches this caravan would bring. As it advanced along the Great River it would leave supplies at all the border settlements. On reaching the point where the Siatang River joins the Great River it would turn into the canyon and proceed another twenty kilometres until it reached their village. The inhabitants of Siatang were responsible for this last lap of the caravan's journey and for that reason it was already time for Baktior to go to the Great River with a group of men who would repair the damages along the trail.

There was much talk about the caravan. Now no one doubted that it would soon arrive.

What a glorious time was the spring! Once more the birds flitted about the village. Everywhere could be heard the gurgling of water. The winds died down, and the only clouds to be seen were the curly white banks massed high above the blinding snow peaks.

4

Along the washed-out, stone-cluttered, boulder-blocked trail leading to the village came Kendiry. He had already been on the road for four days instead of the usual two. He clung to rocks hanging over the cliff and crawled on his

stomach along the edges of precipices. In spots where the snow had swept away every vestige of a path, he had to avoid yawning abysses by descending to the river and wading breast-high through icy water, clutching to the rocks as he made his way around the cliffs jutting out into the stream. On reaching the bank, he rubbed his numb legs and made a bundle of his wet clothes and rawhide shoes, continuing on his way wrapped in a long, shabby robe. He was cold and lonely and determined. This time he had an automatic attached to the belt under his robe. In the bag over his shoulder lay a hundred bullets wrapped in a dirty rag.

At sunset of the fourth day Kendiry emerged from behind the last cliff and came to a halt. The canyon opened out before him. To the right of the river gradually rose the semicircular valley like the segment of a giant apple; first the stony wastelands, then the village, above which rose the black towers of the fortress. The bank of the river on Kendiry's left rose in a sheer cliff ending in a peak beneath the jagged summit of the mountain range.

Kendiry sat on a stone and began such an attentive study of the landscape that one would think he had never seen it before. He looked across the river to the cliff on his left, measuring with his eye every protruding rock and taking note of details of particular interest to him. He looked to the right, beyond the wastelands to where the house of Baktior stood, and to the zigzag path leading to the Zarkhok Pass. His glance slid over the tops of the mountains encircling the settlement and came to rest on the cliff beyond the fortress which served as a gateway to the Siatang canyon.

It seemed that he wished to impress on his memory every undulation of the mountainside, every ledge by which one might climb from Siatang to the summit of the mountains or descend from the summit to the village.

Silently and unhurriedly he made his calculations, closing his eyes as though the better to impress the plan of the region on his mind.

At last Kendiry rose and forced himself to continue on his way, in spite of his exhaustion. Above the house which had been the merchant's shop a red flag fluttered in the soft breeze. Kendiry circled the house before going up to the

door. When he had made sure that no one was watching, he slipped the wooden bolt and glanced inside. The building was empty. On the floor lay an old rug which had been taken from the merchant. He closed the door, stopped for a moment's consideration of what he should do, and then set out for Baktior's house. It took him a long time to climb the path winding up and around the cliff. He passed the opening in the wall and waited for someone to come in sight.

Out of the house came Sho-Pir with large wooden compasses in his hands. He looked the same as ever in his khaki shirt and patched Russian boots. His mind was occupied with a new project—the building of a school next to Baktior's house. The plan was ready, and now he had come to measure the ground which would have to be cleared of stones.

Kendiry assumed a masklike expression and approached the surprised Sho-Pir.

"May you enjoy good health, respected Sho-Pir," said Kendiry, bowing deeply and touching his fingers to his breast and brow. "Has it seemed a long time since you last saw me?"

"I never expected to see you again," said Sho-Pir indifferently. "Have you come alone?"

"Alone, of course, who else should come with me?"

"You are enough, to be sure. Why did you not stay there?"

"Have you forgotten our conversation, Sho-Pir? What was I to do there?"

"Then why did you go away at all?"

"Ah, Sho-Pir! As though a poor man could always do what he wanted! Look!"

Kendiry thrust his hand into his robe and drew out a little leather bag which he shook in his palm.

"What is that?"

"All of my wealth, Sho-Pir. It is not easy for a poor man to make money, but here are eight coins which I received for a very difficult job. When the merchant went away I wanted to remain here. It was unpleasant to watch the merchant. He was very mad—so mad that it sprayed out of his mouth. But if you remember, that day was the first

day of winter. When the merchant was going away he said, 'I have little left; I am going on foot, shaking the ashes of this earth off my feet. But I am afraid to go alone and I cannot carry all my things. Come help me and I shall pay you well.' It turns out that he had a lot of money hidden in the ground. I learned that only when we were in Yakhbar, beyond the Great River. He was a son of a dog all right! I did not want to go, but he said, 'I shall give you ten coins.' That was an unheard-of sum for a poor man like me. I thought it would do no one any harm for a poor beggar to earn that much money. So I went with him. I could not return because it was winter. I waited for the spring. The trail is not yet entirely passable, but here I am. I do not want to go anywhere else. I shall shave beards or do any other kind of work you want me to."

"Hm-m-m," drawled Sho-Pir. "Well, I suppose that is your business. Where do you expect to live? The merchant's house has been turned into a school."

"A school is a very good thing. I shall live wherever you say, Sho-Pir. Has the stall for the donkey been turned into a school too?"

"You cannot live in the stall," frowned Sho-Pir. "But go ahead if you do not mind the dirt."

"I can clean out the dirt. Thank you, Sho-Pir. Where else should a poor barber live? I lived in even worse places on the other side of the Great River. In time I can make myself a house out of stones. Would you like a shave?"

"No thank you. I shave myself."

"Just as you like. I shall go now. I am very tired. The trail is so bad it took me four days instead of two."

"Is it very bad?" asked Sho-Pir with interest. "Tell me where and how badly it is damaged."

Kendiry gave a detailed account of the bad places, and added:

"Do you intend to repair it, Sho-Pir?"

"Of course. We repair it every year."

"Good. Who knows who may want to come here? They might get killed on a road like that. Forgive me for interrupting your work, Sho-Pir. I shall go now. Thank you, thank you."

With his hand pressed to his breast, Kendiry retreat-

ed slowly bowing low all the time until at last he turned his back on Sho-Pir. Then he descended to the village in a weary saunter. Darkness had already fallen.

"There is something I don't like about that fellow," thought Sho-Pir. "What the devil could have brought him back? If the border were patrolled we would never allow people to go wandering back and forth. Pity this is not up to me!"

Since it was now too dark to continue his work, Sho-Pir went into the house to tell Baktior that Kendiry was once more back in the village.

5

A dark, moonless night found Kendiry in the ancient tower where Bobo-Kalon lived. The flickering light of a lamp threw dark shadows on the miserable quarters of this grandson of the Khan. The square room within the tower resembled a large and dreary cell. Bobo-Kalon made not the slightest effort to enliven its unprepossessing stone walls. In places the ancient foundations had settled, leaving cracks in which spiders wove their webs. As Kendiry spoke with Bobo-Kalon, he noticed the head of a snake peeking out through one of these cracks. Its sharp eyes were fastened on Kendiry unwinkingly, and he supposed that Bobo-Kalon must be accustomed to the snake—must in fact have trained it—otherwise it would not be gazing so calm and disinterested through the crack in the wall.

When he came to Bobo-Kalon that night, Kendiry did not ask him how he had spent the winter: the sight of the old man's thin, mummified figure was more eloquent than any words. Bobo-Kalon received him almost graciously. He knew more about Kendiry than anyone else in Siatang, and for that reason he spoke to him as to an equal. His first news was that the wolves had devoured his falcon during the winter. One morning he had opened the door of his tower to see four hungry she-wolves emboldened by hunger. Perhaps they had been waiting in the snow for morning in order to attack Bobo-Kalon himself. In response either to old hunting habits or a desire to defend its master, the falcon had flown out before Bobo-Kalon could close the door. Fastening its

claws into the neck of the strongest of the wolves, it had pecked at its brain until the other wolves attacked the bird, finally devouring it beak and feathers and all.

Bobo-Kalon recounted this quietly and calmly as he sat opposite his visitor on a ragged felt mat. The lamp which stood on a protruding stone in the wall lighted only one side of their faces. Huge, distorted shadows were projected on the opposite wall, but these shadows remained almost motionless, since the two men made no movement, except to occasionally lower their heads.

When Kendiry had said all that was required of him, he waited for Bobo-Kalon's reply. But the proposition he had made presented Bobo-Kalon with a problem requiring deep consideration, and therefore the latter kept speaking of other things. Kendiry listened politely and without interrupting, as though he really found the old man's remarks to be wise and important.

"What were those people thinking of, whose restless spirit inspired them with a desire to conquer our land?" said Bobo-Kalon. "They came and they left, for our winds and mountains, our snows and rivers and our piercing sun proved stronger than they. They built fortresses, enslaved our people, looted villages in the vicinity of their fortresses, and in every way did us harm. This was true of the ancestors of Aziz-khon and the representatives of the emirs, as well as of the fire worshipers who preceded them and the Chinese who came still earlier. Those people had weapons; we had none. We said we would submit. We paid them a portion of our poor possessions. 'The devil with them,' we said. Let our tithes be paid as punishment for our sins. The invaders had also been sent by god. But in our homes and along the rivers and gorges which were inaccessible to them, we continued living as before. They were powerless to make the slightest change in the Preordained and we remained uncontaminated by the spirit of unrest. Do you agree with me?"

"Speak, Bobo-Kalon. I am listening," replied Kendiry, with a glance at the snake's half-closed eyes.

"You yourself are aware of how all that transpired. A representative of some power would appear among us and demand ten sheep and several cows. We would have to feed

the visitor and entertain him, speaking gracious words with our hands crossed over our hearts, smiling when he smiled and seeing him off with proper respect to the turn in the trail. But as soon as he was gone we would spit on the earth and wash our hands in clean water, begging the pirs to pray for us, and dividing up the cost of the visit among all, according to our law. Then we would forget the visitor. A whole year would pass before he once more put in an appearance with feet bleeding from climbing our trails.

"Very well. But then this Sho-Pir came to us and took nothing from us. I thought to myself, 'He must be a fool indeed,' and I laughed at him. But my laughter dried on my lips when he remained to live here and I perceived the dreadful truth which many refuse to perceive to this very day. He remained to live among us, and demanded nothing at all for himself. But his presence brought something which had not existed for thousands of years. The contamination of unrest spread throughout our mountains, throughout the waters of our rivers, throughout our winds and clouds. It touched our people like an illness. I was astounded when I beheld the first man to be infected: the worthless, despicable Baktior, whose very name was unknown at that time. We laughed at him when he began to repeat the stupid words of Sho-Pir. We thought that he had smoked his fill of opium and would sleep it off. But Sho-Pir did not go away. He remained to live among us. And Baktior did not sleep it off. From that day on he has been demented."

"You should have killed him," observed Kendiry nonchalantly.

"We did not kill him. I myself did not wish it. I said, 'If necessary, the Protector will punish him.' I said, 'Turn your ears away from him.' But he kept on speaking and crying that he was in search of happiness, repeating the words taught him by Sho-Pir. We paid no attention to him, thinking that in due time the dev which possessed him would leave of its own accord. At first Baktior said that he was searching for happiness for himself. Then the dev within him grew, and he said that he was searching for happiness for everybody. We wished to drive him away, but that Sho-Pir spoke in his behalf. What could we do against Sho-Pir's weapon? Do you remember how he shot over the head

of said Huban-Sho when the latter was about to strike him? Where is Huban-Sho now? He left us and went to Aziz-khon, like many others who could no longer go on living here. But the Russian remained and Baktior remained. And our faqirs began listening to what they said. At first it was just the young foolish ones, who had not yet lived two cycles. Then the old witch who gave birth to Baktior. Then even a few of the old men were stricken with this disease. The world of our canyon became topsy-turvy. And now everything is being destroyed. Every day some part of the Preordained is being destroyed, just as my tower was destroyed. And I must go on living and witnessing all this. But everything is preordained, and I accept such a life as a trial sent me by the Protector. Thus it is, and I am reconciled. May the light of truth be preserved within my soul! You sit there watching that snake, and now you see that it has closed its eyes just as I close my eyes to the life around me. I have no need for what you have just proposed. I live by a contemplation of Truth."

"Have you no desire to preserve the Preordained?" asked Kendiry subtly. "All that you have spoken is true. But the Preordained is in very truth being destroyed. Will you not raise a finger to preserve it?"

"The Preordained lies within Man's soul. You urge me to consent to becoming Khan. You may make me Khan, but you can never make people who have betrayed the Preordained become loyal to the Khan."

"The souls of the people can be purified. They can be turned inside out like a sheepskin."

"How?"

"By fear, and punishment; by a blood purge."

"I do not wish to shed the blood of my people," said Bobo-Kalon sharply. "If they are to be punished, let it be at the hands of god and not mine."

"Your hands will merely execute the will of god."

"No. The will of god lies in that which is. The hand of man should change nothing. That would be an act of unrest, and unrest is a violation of the Preordained. Let everything remain as it is."

Kendiry realized that it was not within his power to overcome the old man's stubbornness, and he began to lose

patience. The shadow of his hands began to dance about on the wall, and Bobo-Kalon began to watch this shadow without Kendiry's being aware of it.

"Very well, Bobo-Kalon, I respect your wisdom. But if you should close your eyes, and while they were closed everything should be changed, so that on opening them you would perceive the restoration of the Preordained in your mountains, would you not then say to us: 'Everything has changed during the space of my brief sleep. The souls of the people have become purified. The light of truth lies in that which already exists.'"

"Who could accomplish such a thing? Aziz-khon?"

"Perhaps Aziz-khon."

"He is a Yakhbarian. What has he to do with Siatang? It makes no difference whether he or Sho-Pir holds power in Siatang. A dog remains a dog, whether it be black or brown. In either case my people would be living under a foreigner's sword."

"He will come and go."

"Why should he come? I have heard it said that the Most Powerful of Potentates does not wish to wage war. Why should Aziz-khon come if he has no desire to annex Siatang?"

"It is the woman he wants, may god forgive him."

"And he would make war for a woman?"

"Not war. Only give them a lesson. He will come and take the woman and go away again. But when he goes there will be no more Soviet power. He hates everything new just as you do, and he will destroy it because his domain lies next to Siatang. He will do away with Baktior and Sho-Pir and all the violators will taste the vengeance of the Preordained. If you become Khan, your power will be great. The faqirs will know that Aziz-khon is nearby and that he is a friend who is always ready to return if you are in need of aid. The very mountains will preserve the sacredness of the Preordained, as they have always preserved it. You yourself have just spoken about the greatness and inaccessibility of our mountains. Think about what I have said, Bobo-Kalon."

Through half-closed eyes Kendiry watched Bobo-Kalon's wrinkled eyelids, as dry as the skin of the snake drowsing

in the crack of the stone wall. And he wondered what words he could find to describe this back there—in the cosy apartment located in a quiet city street where that perfumed woman would be sitting studying her polished nails in the rosy lamplight as she listened to his incredible tale. It would be very difficult for her poor imagination to visualize the unheard-of and almost inconceivable mountains from which he would have managed to escape only by a miracle. But this passing thought was interrupted by Bobo-Kalon, who slowly raised his heavy lids and began to speak:

"No, my only desire is for peace; wisdom prevents me from becoming Khan."

"Perhaps you will reconsider your words, Bobo-Kalon?"

"I consider only once," replied Bobo-Kalon with a frown. "I have spoken."

There was no point in insisting; Kendiry hid his vexation.

"Just as you say. But will you close your eyes?"

"My eyes are old and see nothing."

"Your word is as unchanging as a rock. Thank you. One more thing I would ask of you: do you promise to remain silent?"

"Silence is the language of the wise. With whom else have you spoken?"

"Only with judge Nauruz-bek."

"What did he say?"

"He said he was willing. Once more he will pass judgment on the people. His word is also like rock."

"That I know. Tell me, will Mirso-Hur return?"

"Mirso-Hur has not yet settled his accounts here. What else would you like to know, Bobo-Kalon?"

"That is all."

Kendiry bid him farewell and issued through the low arched doorway into the darkness of the night. He was greatly displeased with the result of his talk; the old man turned out to be more stubborn than could have been expected. But as he passed through the gate of the fortress a new means of influencing him entered his mind, and he laughed as he thought to himself, "You can turn an ass into a Khan if only you know how to twist its tail."

A few days later a ragged pilgrim made his appearance in Siatang. Anyone who met this emaciated, barefoot, half-naked creature along the trail would naturally have taken him for an ascetic who had renounced the world and given himself up to spiritual contemplation, subjecting his body to tortures designed to annihilate all worldly desire. Formerly such fanatics were to be met with along all the trails of the High Mountains. The inhabitants of the gorges held them to be saints, and believed in their ability to separate body from soul, to charm birds and animals, turn stones into food, and call up devils inhabiting the secret reaches of an invisible world accessible only to the initiate. The appearance of such people had become more and more rare since the establishment of Soviet power. In fact it had been several years since Siatang had received such a visitor. But had the canyon-men seen him now, none of them would have been in the least surprised, assuming that he was bound for distant parts and that they must offer him alms if they wished to avoid the evil eye.

But the pilgrim for some reason preferred hiding from the villagers. On entering the path leading to the valley, he sat down to rest and wait for nightfall among the towering rocks. His emaciated face was small and brown and wrinkled. His withered body was not yet old, but the veins on his arms and the calves of his legs stood out like purple whipcords.

Every evening Kendiry built a fire near his dwelling, on which he would spend hours boiling the mulberries received in payment for his humble services. Since there was no hearth in the stall he had adapted for his living quarters, his fire roused no suspicions. When he had eaten his meagre meal, Kendiry would enter the stall and throw himself on a heap of straw strewn upon the ground.

With the coming of darkness the pilgrim stared for a long time at the fire flickering at the far side of the village, and then began to make his way toward it. He avoided the path, slipping among the rocks of the wastelands where all day long the canyon-men had been clearing the stones from their new lots. But they had long since finished their work and

returned to the village, so that the spot was utterly deserted at this time.

While he was still some distance away, the stranger recognized Kendiry leaning over the fire, so he sat down on a rock and listened to the voices coming from the dark village as he waited for the fire to die out. Then he quickly and cautiously made his way to the stall, where he squatted on the threshold.

"Who is there?" asked Kendiry, who had already retired for the night.

"It is me, Bkhara!" said the pilgrim. "Protection, refuge and salvation!"

"Salvation, merit, the breath from the depths!" replied Kendiry calmly.

"Greetings to the nourisher of plants and flowers, greetings to the sun and to the moon, greetings to the universal, to the purest of the pure." As the pilgrim quickly muttered these words, he touched his thumb to corresponding parts of his body: his heart, his brow, and his hair, grasping his head in his fingers on the last word and then crossing his arms. "Me and myself," he added aloud since Kendiry could not see his gestures in the darkness.

"Speak," said Kendiry. From where he sat squatting motionless in the doorway, the pilgrim began in a high, ringing voice resembling that of a bird.

"Aziz-khon is awaiting the reply of Bobo-Kalon. Everything is ready. The arms which you promised arrived on seven horses. On the eighth arrived the Feringi accompanied by two men on foot. No money was needed; the Feringi said it was unnecessary. The Feringi is now with Aziz-khon awaiting your words. Aziz-khon told me to tell you not to delay; the soldiers of righteousness have to be paid every day. Aziz-khon has spent all his money and borrowed from the merchant Mirso-Hur, who complains loudly and says he will be ruined. The soldiers eat too much. He begs Aziz-khon to hurry. The Feringi shouts at him. Mirso-Hur says that if the soldiers of righteousness are delayed another half moon he will not be able to pay. The Feringi called me aside and told me to tell you that Aziz-khon is afraid the Most Powerful of Potentates will find out. The Potentate does not want war with the Russians. Aziz-khon is afraid to fall into disfavour. If we

delay, the Most Powerful of Potentates may send troops against Aziz-khon, a thing which the soldiers of righteousness also fear. The Feringi ordered Aziz-khon to close all paths into the mountains in order to prevent the Most Powerful of Potentates from learning anything. I was also told to find out from you where the signal fires would be located."

"Is that all?"

"That is all, Thou who raiseth the Hand of Time."

"How many and what kind of weapons did the Feringi bring?"

"Nineteen 'Martinis,' each with the inscription 'Ma-Cha-Allah.' Thirty-three of a type I have never seen before, repeaters with clips for eleven cartridges "

"Are there cartridges?"

"One hundred to each weapon. The soldiers of righteousness are greatly pleased. The Feringi is teaching them how to shoot with the new guns."

"Very well," replied Kendiry dryly and imperiously. "Go immediately. Say that Bobo-Kalon has agreed to become Khan and bestows his blessings on Aziz-khon for the aid he offers. Nauruz-bek will be the judge; he is already drawing up a list of sins committed. When Aziz-khon arrives, all the faithful will come to his aid. Take Aziz-khon aside and tell him that the woman is here and will not go away. Most important—tell Aziz-khon that he must wait—wait and wait patiently until he receives my orders. Let his ressalidar keep tight reins on his soldiers. Soon Sho-Pir will leave to meet the caravan. We shall begin as soon as the caravan arrives. Baktior will repair the road for the caravan, and then it will be possible to come on horseback. Nothing must be done for the present. Nobody must be allowed to leave Yakhbar. Tell them to wait at the Great River. Two fires will be lighted in the mountains above the mouth, three above the village. As for you, Bkhara, this is what you are to do: tell the merchant not to lament—the caravan will cover all his losses; tell the Feringi to keep watching the trail; when Sho-Pir passes the mouth of the river let him immediately come here; and now listen attentively: take the Feringi aside and tell him these exact words—'A wolf which enters the flock before the shepherds are roused devours the sheep in vain.' Repeat what I have said."

"A wolf which enters the flock before the shepherds are roused devours the sheep in vain," repeated the pilgrim in his ringing voice.

"He will understand. Say it just that way. Will you remember everything?"

"I shall remember everything like one twice born."

"Very well. Go now. Has anyone seen you?"

"No one."

"See that no one does."

Muttering the same words he had spoken in greeting, Bkhara slipped out into the darkness and disappeared.

Kendiry stretched out on the straw and soon fell into untroubled sleep.

In the morning he rose as usual and spent much time sharpening his metal razor. When he saw the canyon-men go out one by one to their lots in the wastelands, he began calling to them in prolonged, pleading tones. But today, as on every other day, few of the inhabitants consented to be shaved, for their beards would only grow in again before the Spring Festival and no one wished to waste their hoardings on superfluous shaving.

7

At last the fields and orchards were completely free of winter's coverlet. Only in protected spots between the rocks and at the foot of the cliff could be found piles of dirty, granular snow which gradually settled and hardened. Some of these piles remained deep in the crevices of the rocks until the middle of summer—a stubborn reminder that winter had been and gone.

The fog had already withdrawn from the dazzling white of the summits. The weather had become bright. The air was amazingly clear. Already the trees were in bud. No one in the village gave the devs a thought any more, for everyone was rejoicing in the warmth of the sun. Nothing broke the peace and harmony of nature. More and more often could be heard the singing of the young girls in the evening and the twanging of lutes. The neighbours gathered around the musicians, and everyone was merry. They spoke about ploughing and sowing, about the new goods which the caravan would

bring for the Spring Festival, about the past winter and about the trees and grasses filled with the sap of new life.

With the falling of darkness, lovelorn youths would steal along the fences to have a word with maidens kept under lock and key by stern parents; but no amount of precaution could keep the young people from their rendezvous, for who could follow a young girl every time she went to the river with a water jar on her head, or searched among the rocks for a missing kid? Or what mother could lie awake all night in order to catch her daughter climbing noiselessly up to the flat roofs of the house to find relief from the stuffy room where she slept next to her mother on the hard stone bunk—and also to respond to the soft, persistent whispering of some knight-errant waiting out there in the darkness.

Only Nisso never emerged from her room at night. In vain did Baktior wander in the orchard hoping that she might come out to him. But why should she sneak out to him when nobody forbade her being with him as much as she liked during the day? Everything had been decided, and Baktior's betrothed would not run away from him or break her promise. He had only to wait patiently, calm in the confidence that every day brought nearer the moment when she would become his. It would probably be easier to wait if he did not live here, if he left the village to wander alone, oblivious of the slow passage of time until the promised day arrived.

That is why Baktior gladly accepted Sho-Pir's proposition to take a group of men down the canyon trail from the village to the Great River to repair crumbled ledges, shovel away landslides, and in general repair the road for the long-awaited caravan. Soon Sho-Pir would go to the Volost to meet it.

Baktior eagerly undertook the job. He and Sho-Pir spoke to the canyon-men who during the previous year had built the canal, promising to pay them in kind for working on the trail. For the same payment others agreed to plough and till the fields of those who went away. This time no arguments arose, for everyone had perfect faith in the word of Sho-Pir.

With spades and crowbars and pickaxes, in addition to a two-week's supply of the flour and rice Sho-Pir had kept for the spring, six canyon-men headed by Baktior left Siatang one fine morning.

Among them was Karashir. Fish Bones kept shouting after him to tighten the strings of the bag on his back lest it catch on a rock and all the rice and flour spill out. Karashir did not deign to turn around. What in the world was she thinking of—that he was still under the effects of opium and unable to pick his way? It was high time she learned to stop pestering him with her nonsense.

"Are you lonesome already?" Mariam asked the silent Nisso when Baktior had left and the two of them set about tidying up the house.

"No, I am not lonesome," said Nisso musingly.

"What is on your mind? He will soon return."

"You do not understand anything, Mariam!" said Nisso impatiently, making for the door.

"Stop, Nisso! What is the matter?" cried Mariam, stepping in her path. "Why are you angry at me? What is it I do not understand?"

"You don't understand anything! Anything at all!"

Nisso rarely became so vexed and irritated.

"Sit down, Nisso. Why are you running away? Tell me what is on your mind. Do you think I will not understand then?"

"We have been living together for a long time," said Nisso in hurt tones as she sat down on the edge of the bed, "and still you do not understand. I do not wish to tell you."

Mariam put her arms around Nisso.

"Open up your heart to me, Nisso."

"I thought that my life would be happy, but you see—You always said I was free to do whatever I liked," continued Nisso with difficulty, "and ever since coming here I have thought the same thing. But now I see there can be no freedom for me."

"Why, Nisso? What has happened?"

"Nothing has happened. But why must I get married?"

"Who says that you must? Don't you want to? I thought that you loved him."

"Whom do I love? Whom?"

"Baktior, of course."

"There, you see, Mariam! I knew there was nothing for us to talk about. I don't love Baktior. I know that he is a good man, a very good man, but I don't love him!"

"But you yourself agreed to marry him!"

"That is true. He loves me."

"I cannot understand. And you?"

"I said you did not understand anything," said Nisso glancing at Mariam with a sort of malicious pleasure, but immediately dropping her eyes unhappily. "I do not love him at all."

"Whom do you love?" Mariam herself was now upset by the conversation.

"No one!" answered Nisso, freeing herself from Mariam's embrace. "But if I did, what could I do?" she asked, feeling that her friend's advice was essential.

"Get married."

"But if he has never asked me to?"

"Who is he?"

"Nobody. I only want to know what happens if a man says nothing to a woman."

"The woman herself should speak to him and find out his answer."

Nisso frowned and got up and Mariam could see the anger in her eyes.

"I do not love anybody, Mariam. Do you hear? Nobody at all!"

She ran out the door and at last it seemed to Mariam that she understood everything. She rose and went out deep in thought. There was nobody in the sunny orchard where the buds were about to burst. Sho-Pir was over in the plot designated for the new school building making doorjams. Gulriz was some distance away milking the cow. Nisso was nowhere to be seen.

Mariam started in the direction of Gulriz, but turned back feeling that there was nothing she could say to the old woman at the moment.

8

In a few days Sho-Pir was to go to the Volost. He summoned Hudodod and, in the presence of Nisso and Mariam, told him that until the return of Baktior all responsibilities as Chairman of the Village Soviet devolved on him. Sho-Pir gave him detailed directions as to what he should do, saying

that if he were in doubt about anything he should consult Mariam. In general he should keep Mariam informed of everything that happened in the village. Hudodod gladly promised to consult Mariam, whom he highly esteemed, and told Sho-Pir not to worry about anything.

And indeed there was nothing for Sho-Pir to worry about. Life in the village flowed on quietly and peacefully, the weather was fine, and the canyon-men were too busy with their ploughing to start any quarrels. It was necessary that Sho-Pir himself go to the Volost, for he understood better than anyone else the needs and demands of the village: no one else was capable of selecting the most essential goods from among all those left last winter at the Volost.

"There is one important job which I am not sure you will be able to cope with, Hudodod," said Sho-Pir in conclusion. "The grain must be distributed among the faqirs so that they can clean and sort it."

On hearing this, Gulriz, who had been sitting quietly at her knitting, decided to put in a word.

"I am old, Sho-Pir, and I may be wrong, but listen to me and then make your own decision. Do not have Hudodod touch the grain. Let it remain where it has been stored all winter."

"Why, Gulriz?"

"Our people will quarrel over it. Some will say, 'I should get more'; others will say 'I should.' Without you and Bak-tior the dividing will give rise to much ill feeling. Sowing will not begin so soon; there will be time for you yourself to distribute it when you return."

"You are probably right, Gulriz. You always show foresight. Of course, Hudodod, that is the best plan."

"I think so too," said Hudodod. "There is no hurry."

"Then we have settled everything. Tomorrow morning I shall set out."

"May I go with you?" asked Nisso unexpectedly, and her eyes were shining in spite of her embarrassment.

"What are you talking about, Nisso? Why should you?"

"I want to see the Volost," replied Nisso softly, dropping her eyes. "I want to see how they live there."

Sho-Pir was inclined to exclaim, "You darling!" but he caught himself in time and merely answered. "No, Nisso.

There is no point in your going. Baktior will only worry. Some other time we shall all go together—maybe in the autumn. Would you like that?"

"Just as you say." Nisso wanted to answer resolutely, but her voice faltered.

It did not take Sho-Pir long to get ready. He carved some wooden buttons which he sewed on his patched shirt, put rawhide soles on his old boots, polished the Red Army star on his cap with a bit of putty, making sure not to break off the remaining bits of red enamel, thrust a few wheaten cakes into his kit, and that was all. Then he called Mariam into his room and handed her the revolver which he had kept for her all winter and had carefully cleaned.

"Take it with you," said Mariam. "It's a long trip. You may need it."

"The road is safe enough—I know it well," answered Sho-Pir. "Nothing ever happens along this road. I'm taking that other gun along for hunting, but this one is yours. It was given to you and you must keep it. It would be better, since you women are going to be here alone—oh, of course nothing can happen, only I myself know how much better you feel when you have a thing like this at hand. But don't carry it around unless you have to."

Mariam agreed to keep the revolver. Sho-Pir slipped into his worn, quilted jacket and threw the strap of his gun over his shoulder as he stepped off the porch.

"Why not wait until tomorrow, Sho-Pir? It is already sunset. Whoever sets out on a journey at nightfall?"

"No, I shall go now. I can make half the distance to the Great River before night. I shall sleep in the shadow of a rock and early in the morning I am sure to meet some of our people. It will give me a chance to see how Baktior is getting along with the road. . . . No need to see me off," he said, noticing that Mariam and Nisso were about to go with him. "I want to go alone, all by myself. Here, give me your hands."

He hurriedly pressed their hands in farewell, and was off with a quick stride through the gap in the wall.

"Good luck!" he cried, turning from the other side. "Expect me back in about twenty days. Do not be too lonely, Nisso!"

The fact that his last words were addressed to Nisso brought a smile to her lips. She slipped off unnoticed and rounded the house, where she stood watching the diminishing figure of Sho-Pir slowly cross the wide Siatang valley and at last disappear behind the cliff jutting out into the foaming river.

Nisso did not know that Sho-Pir was as unhappy at parting as she was, but took care to hide his feelings.

The girls went to bed as soon as it was dark. Nisso listened carefully to Mariam's breathing, and when she was convinced that the latter was sleeping soundly, picked up her tunic and slipped out into the night, dressing in the open air. Then she cautiously made her way across the yard to the unfinished school. From one of the window sills she took a small parcel which she had placed there while it was still light. Regardless of the night chill, she left the orchard in nothing but her tunic, gasping with the thrill of her escapade.

Most of all she feared that Mariam would wake up or that she would meet someone before she had passed through the village.

Only when she had crossed the wastelands and approached the cliff along the river path did she stop glancing around and listening for footsteps. She herself did not realize why she was following Sho-Pir. She almost ran through the darkness, wide-eyed, hearing only the beating of her own heart, paying no attention to the path under her feet and thereby risking a plunge over the steep embankment. It was only her natural instinct, the catlike grace of a mountain girl that enabled her to overcome all obstacles almost without noticing them, to place her bare feet only on those rocks which would not give way under her weight and carry her with them over the edge. She was thankful to Baktior for having repaired the trail so that it was unnecessary to step into the cold river.

Without stopping or slackening her pace, driving her young heart to the limit of its capacity, Nisso descended lower and lower along the canyon trail following the noisy Siatang. The only thing that worried her was that she might pass the sleeping Sho-Pir who could not be far away now. Sho-Pir. Nisso did not think of what she would say to him or what he would do when he woke up and saw her. She did

not think of anything except that she would see him—see him! . . .

At a point where the canyon slightly widened out and the riverbank was lined with fallen boulders, Nisso stopped to search among the rocks, feeling with her hand in the darkness. No, he was not here. That meant that he must be up ahead, and Nisso once more rushed forward.

By midnight she was so far away from the village that she began to fear having passed Sho-Pir in spite of all her pains. Once more she stopped to recall all the rocks along the trail and deciding she could not possibly have missed him, she continued on her way.

In one place Nisso's attention was attracted by a particularly dark patch among the rocks above the path. Immediately she realized that it must be a cave. "That is where he is!" she decided with unerring instinct, and began to climb the rocks. When she came level with the lower edge of the cave she stood listening. Only her sharp ears could have detected above the roar of the river the sound of even breathing coming from the depths of this cave, which in remote times had been hollowed out by falling water. "It is he," thought Nisso. "But what if it is Baktior?" The thought frightened her. Baktior and his men also spent the night along the trail. Why had she not thought of that before? Straining all her powers, she became convinced that only one person was sleeping in the cave. That meant that it must be—He!

Nisso pulled herself up on her hands and entered the cave with a rustle of pebbles.

"Who is there?" cried Sho-Pir, immediately waking up. Nisso sensed, rather than saw, that he had his gun in his hand.

"It is me, Sho-Pir," whispered Nisso. Only then did she realize the madness of her behaviour. She wanted to rush away, stopping only to throw Sho-Pir the parcel containing tea and sugar—to dash away before he had a chance to recognize her. But it was too late.

"Nisso! Why are you here? What has happened?"

Nisso did not reply, but her heart seemed about to burst with shame and agitation.

"Why? Tell me. Why are you silent?" Sho-Pir drew

closer to her, feeling his way in the darkness. His hand came in contact with her elbow, and he slipped it along her arm until he reached the fist she was clutching to her cheek.

"Are you crying, Nisso? What is the matter? Tell me, what is it?"

"I—I am not crying, Sho-Pir," whispered Nisso. "Nothing has happened. I do not know why—just because—. Here I am. I have brought you some sugar. And tea. It will be a long journey. . . ."

"You are mad!" muttered Sho-Pir. "You—." But nothing came of his remonstrances. He drew Nisso's shoulders to him, felt her head on his breast and began to stroke her soft, tousled hair. "Calm yourself, Nisso," was all he could find to say. He was as agitated as the girl. Nisso sat quietly with her head on his breast, but he could feel the quick beating of her heart. The blood rushed to his head. All his resolutions, all his sensible decisions were about to vanish like smoke. "No!" he thought, clutching at a saving fact. "She is only fifteen years old!" It was this which decided everything. With a brusque movement Sho-Pir pushed Nisso aside, got up, and went to the entrance of the cave, where he threw wide his arms and stood with his palms pressed against the rough stones of the wall. Nisso could see his figure vaguely outlined against the cliffs of the opposite bank. For a long time he stood thus, with the soft breeze cooling his burning face. He unfastened his jacket and the collar of his shirt. Then he turned sharply and once more sat down next to Nisso, taking her cold hand in his.

"Listen, Nisso. Let us have a heart-to-heart talk. Do you not love Baktior?"

"I want to love him, Sho-Pir. But I cannot," whispered Nisso sadly.

"Then why did you agree to marry him?"

Nisso did not answer for some time, and at last her voice was even softer than before.

"Have you forgotten what I asked you? I asked you if you wished me to marry him."

"Silly. How can I decide such a thing? Only your own heart can decide."

"My heart?" whispered Nisso, and then repeated bitterly, "My heart? Do you not understand?"

"And if I understand? What I wish to say to you, Nisso, is—do you know how old you are?"

"Yes, I know. Why am I not too young to marry Baktior?"

"Because—because—" Sho-Pir sighed deeply. "A betrothed is not yet a wife. There is a Soviet law—" Laughing shortly at his own words, he thought how useless it was to try to explain anything to her! He realized the absurdity of his position and was angry with himself. "Well, it cannot be done, Nisso, and there is nothing else to be said. You can break your engagement to Baktior if you wish. He has a long time to wait for the wedding anyhow—maybe he will change his mind—and as for what you wanted to tell me—well, in three years' time you may change your mind about that also."

"I shall never, never change my mind!"

"Wait a bit. Do not be angry with me; I am thinking only of your happiness. But we have talked on this subject long enough. It is almost sunrise—time for you to be getting some sleep."

"Sho-Pir," said Nisso proudly, but in an injured tone. "I love only you."

"Hm. Well, if you love me, I guess that is all there is to it. If you want to know, I also. . . . Well, you probably understand. There is nothing else to say. We shall go on living the way we are. If you really love me, you can wait two or three years, and you need not worry about me. I shall not be going away anywhere. Then we will talk things over again. Do you agree?"

"Just as you say, Sho-Pir," said Nisso obediently. "Is there anyone else—I do not know who—whom you might fall in love with?"

"No. no. No one at all. You can be sure of that. But enough of this; time to get some sleep. Here, Nisso, take my jacket. Just see how you are shivering! Running off like this in nothing but your tunic!"

Sho-Pir took off his jacket and tucked it solicitously around Nisso, who had curled up on a bare stone. He stroked her hair and kissed her clumsily on the forehead; then he went to the entrance of the cave to smoke his pipe, and there he remained sitting motionless with his arms folded until the dawn without knowing whether Nisso was sleeping or not.

The stars faded; the sky became brighter. When he could make out the trail, Sho-Pir turned to Nisso and saw that she was sleeping soundly. Many years had passed since he had experienced the tenderness that welled in his breast as he stood looking down at her. At last he tore his glance away and reached for his gun and knapsack. After a moment's hesitation he also took up the parcel containing the tea and sugar. Leaving two cakes on the stone next to Nisso, he slipped down onto the trail, swung his gun over his shoulder, and strode quickly and resolutely away.

Nisso continued to sleep peacefully, wrapped in Sho-Pir's jacket.

9

On the day following Sho-Pir's departure, another visitor came to Kendiry. He did not come along the canyon trail, but along the summit of the first range above Siatang. He plunged down the mountainside in a cloud of dust, keeping his balance with a stick held behind him like a rudder. All the inhabitants of Siatang saw him and engaged in a wondering discussion as to why he should have chosen so hard and dangerous a route. The stranger landed among the rocks of the wastelands and made no attempt to hide from the canyon-men who were working on their new lots. The latter put down their pickaxes and gazed curiously at his ragged robe which did not reach even to his filthy bare knees. His shoes were tied on with woolen strings, and he was wearing a turban of rust-coloured homespun. The stranger was young and lean, but did not appear to be hungry. There was nothing to define his nationality in his dirty sun-tanned, wind-burned face with its dark brows and hooked nose. He glanced indifferently at the canyon-men as he hurried past, finally stopping to address one of them:

"Where does the man named Kendiry live?" he asked. On having the donkey stall pointed out to him, he hastened toward it.

Kendiry met him at the door. The stranger walked up to him and looked into his cold eyes as he said in the Siatang dialect, with just the faintest shadow of a smile in the corner of his lips:

"There is no life for an honest man in the realm of Aziz-khon. I had a home. I had wheat fields. I had a cow and eight sheep, I had a wife and three children. And all of these things were taken away from me by the accursed Khan. My wife was stoned to death and my children died one after the other. I said to myself: I shall get revenge! Aziz-khon is my enemy to the death! I shall go to the Soviet land where there is life for poor people like me. I heard that in Siatang lived a poor barber named Kendiry who had likewise suffered at the hands of the rich and had escaped to a better life. So I decided to go to him and say, 'Let us live together!' I had a hard time finding my way; my feet were cut by the stones and I nearly froze to death in the mountains. It was a very difficult journey. I lived in constant fear of devils and snow panthers up there among the fierce winds and whirling snows. I marvel how I managed to reach here at all. But now that I am here I hope you will allow me to lie down next to you. I am grateful to these kind people for showing me where you live."

Here he bowed to two canyon-men who had followed him to Kendiry's hovel and stood at a respectful distance listening to his story.

"Praised be the Protector! But I have kept you from your work, my good people. May you reap a bountiful harvest of wheat!"

"I can offer you nothing better than the stall of an ass," said Kendiry. "Do not despise my lowly quarters. Come in and rest, and then we shall speak together."

The stranger crossed his arms on his breast and stooped to enter, while the canyon-men returned to their work, telling everyone about what they had just witnessed.

"Thank goodness they have left us alone! At last I can talk like a human being!" exclaimed the stranger. "You can't imagine how I hate mouthing such gibberish. Did you recognize me at once?"

"It would do me little credit if I did not immediately recognize my 'pilgrims,'" said Kendiry with a short laugh. "Why the devil did you choose such a difficult route? Sit down on—on the ground. How do you like my quarters?"

"Some day you will offer me a better reception in one of the large cities, I hope. I wanted to avoid the trail: your people are working there."

"Did you see them?"

"Got a glimpse of them from up above. It will take them another ten days to finish repairs. Will that give us enough time?"

"Just enough it seems to me. We shall speak of that later. Tell me the news from 'over there'; when did you leave the city?"

"About six weeks after you. For a month I wandered through the eastern provinces until I was summoned on your business. That's about all. Do you intend giving me something to eat? I never was so hungry in my life. What do you live on here?"

"Fine fare!" snorted Kendiry. "I can make you a porridge of rotten beans mixed with a few grams of fine quality Siatang flour if you like."

"I thought as much. That Bkhara (by the way, how do you like his high-sounding language?) gave me a fairly accurate account of your circumstances, so I decided to bring you a little cheer. Perhaps it was risky to be carrying trifles which are not exactly characteristic of these parts, but I thought you would appreciate them."

So saying, the stranger untied his sack and pulled out two cans of sardines, a can of sandwich-spread, a bottle of cognac and a box of cigars.

"You are indeed a good companion, my dear Feringi!" exclaimed Kendiry with undisguised pleasure. "Incidentally, what's your name now? But here, we better throw your sack over this stuff, just in case."

"I'm called Shir-Mamat. 'Shir' means tiger, and fits in with the names in these parts. Have you no glasses or bread?" he asked with a wry smile as he covered up the food.

"How could a poor barber be expected to have such luxuries?"

"Then we shall have to take turns at the bottle. I hope you have nothing catching."

"The same to you," replied Kendiry as he pushed the cork down into the bottle and extended it to his guest. "Here, take a drink."

"To the health of that—Nisso! You certainly have made good use of the situation."

"The girl has been a great help. But we shall speak of

that later." Kendiry opened up one of the cans with his knife, took a drink from the bottle, cut off the tip of a cigar and turned it over in his fingers.

"Is it really a Havana?"

"The very finest. I carry them around specially for such 'castaways' as you. Do you like it?"

Kendiry took a long draw and half closed his eyes without replying. In his other hand he daintily held a fat sardine.

"The accepted thing is to smoke after your meal," he remarked, "but I can't wait."

"What else would you like right now?" asked the Feringi with a smile.

"A bath, my friend! A nice white bathtub with hot water and a shower! Incidentally, how did you ever manage to achieve such a miracle with your knees? And in general you seem to have donned the hide of a hippopotamus."

"The recipe is simple enough: clay and ashes. The effect is heightened by adding a few drops of melted mutton fat mixed with sand. To be rubbed on the skin once a day. Only it must be applied over a good foundation best achieved by two or three months of sizzling sun, regardless of its affect on the heart. How do you manage?"

"You forget that I am not a European," laughed Kendiry. "The colour of my skin is natural. Oh, to be sure there are certain additions, as a result of which I dream of a bath—a good hot bath!"

"Well, we can manage that all right. Come for a visit during your vacation and I shall get the bath ready and even make you a present of a bathrobe."

"Thanks. If I am ever lucky enough to get a vacation I shall dress in anything you like except a robe. I get enough of them here. But you are luckier than me. Soon you will be going back and getting a vacation, while I—, I'm afraid that I shall have to spend another year or two among these barbarians."

"Your value is rated accordingly."

"What good is that to me in the long run? I didn't mind it so much until this winter. Sometimes it even seemed to me that I had known that other world only in a dream. I don't agree with our system. From very childhood we get used to modern civilization, so that we even forget we were ever

anything but Europeans. And then—back we are sent to barbarism. But our souls can't go back. That's what makes it so hard. After spending those two weeks in the normal environment of the city. . . . Of course it would have been better never to have gone there! I had just begun to adjust myself once again when I had to come back. Now I feel the deprivations all the more keenly. I should like to exchange places with our mutual friend who never goes anywhere himself, just sitting comfortably in the city and bossing us around. How do you think he would like it?"

"Incidentally he told me he had a great desire to come here. But he couldn't do that."

"Why not?"

"On account of his eyes."

"Has he poor eyesight?"

"He has excellent eyesight but have you forgotten that his eyes are not like yours and mine? They are too light."

"Ah, yes. But sometimes the natives here also have grey eyes. You could almost take some of them for Russians."

"Nevertheless he is considered ineligible. As for you, my friend—of course it's hard to offer advice. If I were you I would go in for sport, or perhaps hunting."

"Thank you!" said Kendiry testily. "Perhaps you would like to sling that razor at a wild ram? Last year I had a flint-lock which made me feel like a regular sportsman. But the merchant reclaimed it and I had no desire to irritate the old miser."

"Speaking of guns, where is your revolver?"

"Hidden in the ground, of course. Have another drink."

There they sat, dirty and ragged, talking about one thing or another for an hour and a half. Then they got down to business. Kendiry was the first to speak.

"Did you see Sho-Pir?"

"Of course. Striding along like a trooper. That's why I'm here."

"Let's discuss our plan."

"All right. Only as a person new to this business, I should first like to get the whole situation clear. There are some points I don't understand. Aziz-khon will put in an appearance, and then what?"

"Then the Russian Red Army men will put in an appearance."

"Why should we warn the Russians?"

"I shall explain. The garrison at the Volost consists of twenty-one men. Ten more came with the caravan last autumn. How many could they spare in an emergency?"

"About twenty, I suppose."

"Quite right; I'm calculating on that number. They wouldn't leave less than ten at the Volost. Those twenty will be easily overcome as soon as they arrive. But of course the Russians won't stop at that. They'll call out troops from the Eastern Border where they already have two large posts. It will take at least a month for them to reach here, but then the fun will begin. This time the gallant warriors of Aziz-khon will be wiped out. Naturally he will not withdraw from Siatang before then."

"Why do you think so? Incidentally, just for the psychological interest—do you think the Khan really loves that girl?"

"He loves her all right. And if it were not for her. . . . In a word, she is the first motivating force. The first, but by no means the most important. His unexpressed motives are, so to speak, more prosaic. Neither he nor anyone else mentions them, but the fact is that ever since the aristocracy of Siatang emigrated to Yakhbar impoverished, having lost their land and all sources of income, the merchants in both Siatang and Yakhbar have had no business. Aziz-khon's pockets have become empty because he has had no one from whom to collect road taxes. And in the eyes of the Most Powerful of Potentates, he has lost all his prestige. Consequently he is anxious to have all the emigrants return in the hope that everything will again be as it once was."

"Can he really be so stupid as to believe that the Bolsheviks would allow Soviet power to be overthrown on even so unprepossessing a patch of their territory? Doesn't he realize that it's only a question of the time it takes to bring armed forces here?"

"In the last analysis he is of course a fool, because he counts on something else. But so far as that goes—well, first of all, I do everything in my power to strengthen his hopes, and secondly he is so limited in his outlook that he

thinks the whole world is contained within these mountains, and that they are sufficient to keep out any army. He considers his fifty-three rifles an invincible force. I can imagine the expression on his face when he received them! Once he arrives, he will not be in any hurry to leave, especially if we tell him that another caravan is expected any day. He will set up a local Khan, proclaim him his vassal, and launch on a spell of carousing that will last until his hearties gobble up all the sheep in the country. I shall do my best to encourage the protraction of this holiday-making. Well—who will be to blame if in a month's time the Russian forces wipe out his warriors?"

"There's no doubt that they'll wipe them out. And then what?"

"Our mission will have been brilliantly carried out. During that month Russia will raise protests in diplomatic circles: the Yakhbarians have raided Soviet territory! The whole world will get to know that there is fighting on the border. It is clear that in the negotiations between the Russians and the Most Powerful of Potentates scheduled to take place during the next month, the ambassadors of the two sides will scarcely be able to exchange notes of genuine friendship. In the meantime our government will take advantage of the situation to secure those advantages from the Most Powerful of Potentates which we have been trying unsuccessfully to obtain for so long a time."

"Such an excellent plan does you honour. But imagine for a moment what will happen in the event those twenty men are not sent from the Volost."

"You should be ashamed of such a poor knowledge of Russian psychology, my friend. They have the bad habit of ignoring their own interests when the fate of the most insignificant handful of natives is involved. They always rush to the rescue at such moments. Of course they will come. They will mount their horses and set out at breakneck speed the very minute you inform them that basmachi have raided Siatang."

"All right. But what if the warriors of Aziz-khon do not manage to wipe them out?"

"Twenty men?" snorted Kendiry scornfully. "Bkhara told me you had brought more than fifty rifles alone, not to men-

tion the flintlocks. Add to that the unexpectedness of the attack, the disposition of our forces, the advantage offered by the mountains, and the aid of local sympathizers."

"Are you actually counting on the latter?"

"Unquestionably. But our advantages are sufficient even without them. I myself plan to give Aziz-khon certain tactical advice."

"You are right, of course. I agree with everything. Now perhaps you will give me my instructions."

"With pleasure. First of all, some exact figures: The caravan will leave the Volost and proceed along the Great River. It will take eight days to reach the point where the Siatang flows into the Great River and an additional two to climb along the Siatang to the village. In the interest of the merchant and his hired soldiers it is important that Aziz-khon seize the caravan only when it reaches the village. The Red Army men will arrive immediately after the seizure. It is essential that events take place in quick succession and without delay in order to prevent the spreading of rumours which may upset our plans. Accordingly, if we assume that the caravan will leave the Volost on the first, it will arrive here on the tenth. Aziz-khon must occupy Siatang on the ninth, and the Red Army men arrive on the eleventh, or the twelfth at the very latest. If it takes the caravan ten days to reach here, the Red Army men should make it in six (taking into consideration the crossing of the passes). Sho-Pir has already gone to the Volost, and you must set out after him this very day, my friend. Watch the preparations for the despatching of the caravan without making yourself known. Five days after it leaves, appear in a state of utter exhaustion before the head of the Volost garrison and say you have just escaped from Aziz-khon who is marching on Siatang with an armed band. They will immediately mount their horses and dash off, arriving at just the proper moment. Perhaps they will come a day later than we plan, but that does not matter. The important thing is that they should not arrive a day earlier."

"How will Aziz-khon learn of the movements of the caravan so that he can reach here the day before it arrives?"

"That is simple enough. As soon as the caravan pitches camp the last night before reaching the mouth of the Siatang River, Bkhara, who will be following its movements from up on the ridge, will build a signal fire. Aziz-khon's patrols will see it and on that very night Aziz-khon will cross the Great River. He will reach here on the following night—in other words, on the eve of the caravan's arrival. I myself made all arrangements with Aziz-khon, and already Bkhara is perched somewhere up above the trail. All the cogs in the machine will fit in place under one condition—namely, that you appear before the commander of the Soviet garrison exactly five days after the departure of the caravan."

"What am I to do after that?"

"Hm-m. I must warn you that you will probably be unable to do anything, for it is more than probable that you will be placed under arrest until your tale is verified. But who are you? A miserable beggar who has run away from Aziz-khon. After sitting in jail for two weeks or a month, you will be released. Of course you are taking a chance, but if the worst comes to the worst—if, in fact, you were sentenced to death, you would die, I think, in the role of a beggar, am I right? It is essential that no suspicion fall on me."

"Surely you cannot doubt me."

"Not for a second. I know you well."

"Thanks. Is that all?"

"Yes. Let's finish the cognac and have a cigar. . . . As for that girl—if it hadn't been for her, I would have had to find other circumstances to serve our purpose. It is likely that then the operation would have been staged in an entirely different place. This turned out to be a very lucky situation."

"What do you think he will do with her?"

"I have no idea, and it makes no difference."

"Of course. How did you manage to dupe the merchant?"

"That took long preparation. I arranged things so that he was first ruined and then driven out of here. Everything else followed as a logical result of his desire for vengeance. The support of those of my followers who were emigrants, for instance, came naturally enough. Money and promises

secured the others. I considered the most important element of my entire plan to be the complete isolation of the holdings of Aziz-khon. Had the least rumours of this matter come to the ears of the Most Powerful of Potentates, everything would have fallen through, for he is eager to maintain friendly relations with Russia. It is possible that he would even have sent soldiers to arrest Aziz-khon so as to prevent his entering Siatang. With your help we achieved such isolation, is that not true?"

"Absolutely true. The Most Powerful of Potentates has remained blissfully ignorant of everything. Perhaps it would be fitting to drink his health at this time, 'comrade' barber?!"

"The last drop must certainly be for him, my good 'lord' Feringi."

"And now it is time for me to leave."

"Be off by all means. I wish you luck from the bottom of my heart. It was wise of you to let your arrival here be known to everybody. Let them see you again."

"Unquestionably. That's important for the future. Ah, I almost forgot—in the event of a cross-examination: the settlement belonging to Aziz-khon from which I ran away is called Chorka, do you know the place? It's on the southern border. It was there you once shaved my head and I complained to you of my hard lot, in reply to which you described your splendid life in Siatang. I came here to warn you of the preparation being made to raid Siatang and you sent me to report what I knew to the Volost. Being unfamiliar with these parts I lost my way, which explains why it took me so long to reach the Volost. Do you think this is good enough?"

"Excellent. You have shown wise forethought. Incidentally, the idea has just struck me—would you like to have a look at the girl who has won the Khan's heart?"

"Why not? Is she really as beautiful as they say?"

"You will see for yourself. It may serve you in good stead in the future. Come on."

Kendiry and his guest left the hovel and climbed past the rocks up the path to Baktior's house. The canyon-men stopped their work to watch them go and to pass sympathetic remarks about Kendiry's dirty, ragged companion. They found him very lucky to have landed on Soviet soil after the

Khan had deprived him of his wife and home and all his cattle.

As they approached Baktior's house and saw Nisso and Mariam on the porch, Kendiry assumed a humble mien and led his companion through the gap in the wall.

"Hello, Nisso. Good morning, Comrade Dauletova," he said with the slight condescension accepted in addressing women. "Is Sho-Pir home? We have come to see him."

"No, he is not," replied Nisso. "You should know that."

"How should I know? All day long I sit in my doorway waiting for someone to come for a shave. But no one ever comes. It is a good thing I have no wife. How would I ever keep her? Where is Sho-Pir?"

"Sho-Pir has gone to the Volost," said Mariam with a glance at Kendiry's companion.

"Is Baktior home?"

"He has not yet returned. He is working on the trail. What do you want? Who is your friend?"

"There is a matter I wanted to talk over with them," said Kendiry with a vexed click of his tongue. "Here is a man who has run away from the hardships he suffered in Yakhbar. Tell them about yourself, Shir-Mamat."

Shir-Mamat made a deep bow as he mournfully chanted the story of his misfortunes.

"He must speak to the authorities. It is a very important matter."

"Hudodod lives down in the village," said Mariam. "He is secretary of the Village Soviet."

For some time Kendiry looked at his companion as though weighing the matter.

"No," he replied at last. "He must speak to Sho-Pir."

"What about?" asked Mariam. "Perhaps I can advise you."

"No, this is not a woman's business. Never mind, I shall tell Baktior when he returns. You go along, Shir-Mamat. You will see Sho-Pir when you get to the Volost. Forgive us for disturbing you, Nisso. Forgive us, Mariam."

The stranger took his leave, muttering the prophet's blessings while Kendiry remained on the porch.

"He has been badly frightened," said Kendiry as he

followed the retreating figure with his eyes. "Do you think he will find Sho-Pir at the Volost, Comrade Dauletova?"

"I suppose so. What is worrying you so?"

"Nothing, nothing. If he finds Sho-Pir, then everything will be all right. He is a good man. A very good man. He does not think of himself. Give me a bit of flour, Nisso. I have nothing at all to eat."

Without a word Nisso went to her room and returned with a tubeteikaful of flour which Kendiry emptied into the hem of his robe. "May you be rewarded for your kindness," he said as he turned away taking care not to spill a grain of the flour.

"That Kendiry is a strange person," said Mariam thoughtfully.

"A good person, it seems to me," replied Nisso. "But Sho-Pir does not like him. He is very poor. He lives quietly and does no one any harm. I cannot understand why Sho-Pir does not like him."





CHAPTER NINE

1

THE SPRING Festival was approaching. For several days Nisso had been going out to the wastelands to help Hudodod, who had undertaken the ploughing of Baktior's field in his absence. Mariam remained at home to weigh the grain and figure out how much should be given to each, so that no one should be offended. In addition to this, Mariam was preparing quarters for the people who were expected to arrive with the caravan. By summer the new school would be ready, one room of which was to serve as a dispensary. Until this was ready the doctor would have to receive his patients in his own room. The merchant's shop would serve very well as a cooperative store. From morning to night Gulriz pounded the kernels of apricot pits into a paste, churned butter, and made khalva out of mulberries. There was to be no lack of sweetmeats during the Spring Festival.

Nisso said nothing about having been with Sho-Pir in the cave, and Gulriz was as sure as ever that her son's betrothal was to be announced with great ceremony on the day of the Spring Festival. Mariam had her suspicions, but asked no questions. Nisso was in such a nervous state that she could hardly wait for the return of Sho-Pir, who, she was sure, would offer a wise and correct solution to their problem.

Baktior's lot was at the extreme edge of the wastelands, at the very foot of the cliff, so that it was particularly stony. Tirelessly Nisso and Hudodod piled the stones into huge pyramids at the edge, so that with every day the ground became more level and ready for ploughing. Hudodod and Nisso knew that Baktior would have little time for farm work when the caravan arrived, and so they set about weaving the large drag-basket with which the canyon-men raked the land

after ploughing and sowing. One morning when Nisso was returning from the fortress with a load of willow branches on her back, she met Nauruz-bek climbing up the narrow path. She could not move aside with her clumsy burden, and he apparently had no desire to. Frowning and sullen, he approached her without slackening his pace and pushed her aside with such force that she fell down.

"Are you crazy?" cried Nisso angrily as she got up. "Why did you push me?"

"Keep your mouth shut while you are able, filthy one," replied Nauruz-bek, shaking his fist in rage. "You are a blight to the eyes of all who look at you! Do you think you shall always be able to steal branches from the Khan's residence? Just wait! Soon you will be having the feel of those willows on your back!"

"You must be drunk with opium," replied Nisso boldly. "Leave me alone!"

"Be off, you snake!" shouted Nauruz-bek. "I have no wish to spit in your eye all by myself. Soon everyone will be spitting in your eye, do you hear? Get off the path!"

Nauruz-bek stooped down and picked up a stone, while the frightened girl jumped to one side wondering what had come over the old man. Never before had he shouted at her when they had chanced to meet. Her eyes burned with hatred as she watched him make his way to the fortress. When he had disappeared within Bobo-Kalon's tower she began to gather her scattered branches, brooding the while over this unexpected insult.

Later, when she was working with Hudodod in the fields, she told him what had happened. "I cannot imagine why he should have done such a thing," said Hudodod thoughtfully. "Yesterday Issof also began to shout at me, and you know how well he had been behaving. He began such shouting and cursing that I ran away from him as though he were possessed. People told me that a bit earlier he had given Saukh-Bogor such a beating that she is still unable to get up. This had not happened for a long time. And yesterday another old man threw a stone at Zuaida and almost struck her in the head. I cannot imagine what has come over them. They have become as vicious as they were in the old times. I suppose it is because Sho-Pir is away and they are not afraid

of me. When he comes back he will put them in their place!"

That night the inhabitants of Siatang, many of whom had already taken to sleeping up on the roof, saw a mysterious fire burning high in the mountains, approximately where Baktior had sown his grain the previous year. "What can it be?" the canyon-men asked each other. "No one from the village has gone hunting, and even if he had, where would he get so much brush for a fire?" There was no path leading to that spot. Even if someone had become lost in the mountains, he could hardly have climbed to so inaccessible a place. As they watched this mysterious fire glowing on the heights, some of the canyon-men were inclined to attribute it to the devs.

Nisso, Mariam and Gulriz slept indoors, so they knew nothing about it. But in the middle of the night they were awakened by a distant beating of drums.

"What can it be?" asked Nisso, who was the first to jump out of bed. "Wake up, Mariam. Do you hear?"

Mariam quickly got up and listened.

"Maybe it is the caravan," said Nisso.

"Impossible. A caravan has bells, not drums."

"They seem to be in different places. The sound is coming from somewhere up above," said Nisso in surprise. "Come outside and see."

Both of them ran out into the yard. The monotonous, menacing roll of the drums grew louder and louder in the silence of the night. Nisso and Mariam immediately caught sight of flickering lights high up in the mountains. Three fires were already burning on distant heights.

"I am afraid," whispered Nisso. "What can it be, Mariam?"

"I cannot imagine," answered Mariam, putting her arms around Nisso. "Look, the people are waking up."

Lights began to flash here and there down in the village. Siatang was roused to danger by the drums, whose dull, even beating shattered the starry peace of the night and was multiplied by the menacing echoes of the canyon.

"Ee-yo!" came a shriek through the darkness.

"Nisso! Mariam! Where are you?" cried Gulriz, running out onto the porch. "Come here! There is evil in the air!"

"Here we are!" answered Mariam.

With frozen heart, Mariam ran into her room, crying, "Get dressed, Nisso."

She quickly threw on her clothes and loaded her gun with trembling fingers. Both the girls ran to Gulriz. Down in the village a large fire was now burning, and they could see the little black silhouettes of people running about it.

A rustle of pebbles sounded in the darkness near the porch. The girls jumped back as a figure ran up the steps.

"It is me—Kendiry! Do not be afraid!"

"Stop, Kendiry!" called Mariam. "What is happening?"

"The basmachi have come!" cried Kendiry breathlessly. "The basmachi! Aziz-khon is here! I have come to tell you that you must hide, Nisso!"

"Where can she hide? What are you saying? How do you know?" asked Gulriz in a frightened voice.

"Calm yourself," said Kendiry. "They are still far away. We have time. They are marching up there where the sound of the drums is coming from. I have already told Hudodod and he is gathering the people. Soon Sho-Pir will come. They will kill him. And they will kill you too if you remain here, Nisso. I cannot run because I have sprained my ankle. Sho-Pir must be warned. Baktior is also somewhere along the trail. But you must hide, Nisso. I have told you everything. Now I shall go down to the village."

Having said this all in one breath, Kendiry ran limping off the porch.

"Wait, Kendiry, wait a minute," cried Mariam, but he had already disappeared in the darkness.

Nisso was so overwhelmed by this news that for a minute she could not say a word.

"What shall we do, Mariam? What can we do?" exclaimed Gulriz. "We must hide in the mountains."

"No!" cried Nisso. "Stay here. Nothing will happen to you. But I shall go! I shall go to him all by myself! Sho-Pir must be warned! They will kill Sho-Pir!"

"Oh, my son, my son!" moaned Gulriz, wringing her hands. "What will they do to him?"

"Do not cry, Naná," said Nisso, suddenly calm.

"I shall go with you," said Mariam.

"No, you must remain here. They would catch us if we went along the trail and you cannot climb the cliffs, Mariam. Nor can you, Gulriz. You must remain here!"

Tearing herself out of Mariam's arms, Nisso jumped off

the porch and ran to the cliffs. From somewhere on the heights came the sharp, intermittent sound of gunfire, whose echo bounced between the canyon walls.

Scarcely had Nisso reached the rocks when three figures rushed out of the shadows. Before she had a chance to cry out they had thrown a sack over her head. Nisso struggled to free herself, but they soon had her stretched out on her back. Two more figures ran up. Nisso was quickly bound with ropes and left lying there motionless.

"Sh-h!" whispered Kendiry to one of the bandits. "Hide her for the present, and then bring her into the tower. I shall go below."

2

The drums, which had not been heard in Siatang since the wars of the Khans, continued to beat with insistent, maddening monotony. The sound neither approached nor withdrew. Slowly the moon came up, lighting the figures of the canyon-men running hither and thither through the village. About thirty faqirs with their wives and children had gathered in Hudodod's yard. They shouted and waved their arms in heated discussion as to what they should do, while their women tried to calm the crying children. Hudodod ran from house to house collecting weapons, but he found nothing but four old flintlocks and a dozen ancient battle bows which had been handed down from generation to generation. They dragged crowbars and pickaxes and wooden clubs into Hudodod's yard. Everyone knew that the old men who supported the Preordained could have supplied them with another half dozen guns (Nauruz-bek had even a repeating rifle) but when Hudodod and several other of the canyon-men went to their houses, they found the doors locked to them.

In utter despair Hudodod ran back to his house, where there were now only half the number of people who had been in the yard. In their terror, the faqirs had set out, pushing and shoving each other along the path leading past the fortress to the Upper Pasture. Women with infants in their arms struggled to keep up with the others.

When they had scarcely passed the fortress, from somewhere up above came a round of rifle fire. Bullets rained down on the path. The faqirs turned in panic and rushed

back in the direction of the village. Three young men armed with flintlock rifles took up positions at the edge of the path. Catching sight of pale shadows moving in the moonlight on the top of the cliff, they opened the tripods of their antique weapons and fired a few shots. Hudodod joined them, but was almost crushed by a cascade of rocks which suddenly came crashing down. The landslide cut off the path to retreat. Hudodod realized there was nothing he could do but try to reach the Upper Pasture.

While the faqirs ran to the village, grabbing up their children and shouting at their terrified women, the four young canyon-men who had been cut off crawled in the shadow of the rocks to hide from the enemy's bullets. When at last the four reached the head of the canal, the shooting ceased. Clinging to the foot of the cliffs and avoiding moonlit spaces, they managed to reach the next cliff, beyond which the narrow river came roaring over the boulders. The moonlight did not penetrate to this spot: the path climbed in the shadow of the cliffs, and there was not a soul around.

As he mounted the path, Hudodod planned his future action. He would await the dawn in the Upper Pasture and then climb to the top of the ridge, where he would search for a trail leading down to the Zarkhok canyon which ran parallel with the Siatang canyon. He would follow it to the Great River where he would meet and warn the caravan coming from the Volost.

The faqirs who had been turned back by the rifle fire scattered through the orchards, jumping over the walls in their haste to reach and cross the wastelands and rush down the canyon trail. They were convinced that the basmachi had made their appearance from the Upper Pasture and the mountainsides, and that the trail to the Great River was open.

Shots came from the village itself. A woman fell with a bullet in her side, and the cries of her dying could be heard throughout the valley. The crowd had already dispersed over the stony descent to the wastelands, and over the new farmlands bathed in moonlight. Someone who had already reached the first cliff shouted above the cries of despair and the weeping of the children, "Come here! Come here!" Everyone rushed toward the voice.

But scarcely had the scattered people drawn together

and begun to file down the canyon trail when the rush of galloping horses came from up ahead.

Another cry of despair arose, heightened by its reverberation in the canyon. Once more the people turned back, jostling each other in their frenzied efforts to escape from this trap. A little boy who had been knocked under the feet of the stampeding mob plunged headlong over the edge of the precipice into the roaring river below. The water immediately closed over him while his frantic mother called "Marod! Oh Marod! My Marod!" But the mob carried her along and her cries were drowned in the general confusion.

The beating of hoofs and the menacing howls of the basmachi grew nearer. Scarcely had the faqirs left the trail and entered the wastelands than the first horsemen flew past with sabres flashing in the moonlight and guns firing on all sides. Their robes waved above the cruppers of their foaming, snorting horses and their blood-curdling cries of "Urrur, urrur!" alternated with the despairing wails of the faqirs who had sought refuge among the rocks. From the depths of the canyon beyond the cliff came a blast of trumpets.

In a few minutes, furious horsemen were charging through all the lanes of the village, driving indoors any who happened to be in the roadways. Other horsemen chased the faqirs from behind the rocks in the wastelands. Men, women and children ran with their hands over their heads to protect them from the whips of the invaders. People would fall down, get up, continue their flight only to fall again without a single cry or plea for mercy, intent only on reaching the nearest shelter. A few of the weaker ones remained lying on the rocks covered with blood.

Yet a few of the canyon-men had managed to slip away unnoticed and were now climbing cautiously up the side of the cliff, afraid of giving themselves away by the falling of a stone, the rustling of a bush or the speaking of a word. The side of the cliff became gradually more steep, but they continued climbing in scattered isolation without a thought to where they were going.

Soon the rolling of the drums ceased. The signal fires died down. Siatang was in the hands of the basmachi. Leaving only some fifteen horsemen to patrol the lanes of the village, the band of raiders went to the fortress where they set

up headquarters. A huge campfire soon flared up in the fortress yard. A few of the basmachi could be seen bustling about, skinning and removing the entrails from the sheep they brought from neighbouring houses. Confident that they were beyond all danger, they thought of nothing but the coming feast.

Nauruz-bek was the first of the local inhabitants to enter the fortress. He greeted the basmachi by raising his arms and bowing, while he searched for Aziz-khon among the sulen faces about the fire. But neither Aziz-khon nor his trusted advisors were yet among those who had entered the village, and no one in the fortress paid the slightest attention to Nauruz-bek. The judge stopped bowing and made his way to the tower of Bobo-Kalon, glancing uneasily on either hand. But the sight of two old men at the door of the tower with rifles across their knees made him change his mind. He stepped to one side and took a seat on a stone with his hands clasped on his belly, half closing his eyes under the hostile and suspicious glances of the basmachi in the hope that his appearance would convey to them that he was willing to wait indefinitely until one of them should open the conversation.

3

The fortress underwent a transformation as soon as the first rays of the sun appeared over the mountain peaks. The basmachi were preparing for the triumphal entry of Aziz-khon and his suite into Siatang. The yard of the fortress was strewn with rugs and carpets and felt mats collected from the inhabitants. A large tent of European type (presented to Aziz-khon by the Feringi and brought to Yakhbar along with the guns) had been set up between the mill and the new canal. The green banner of Islam waved above the tent, while its sides were hung with narrow Persian rugs. Four poles at the corners were decorated with yaks' tails and bright silk ribbons. The basmachi had made a path of rugs leading from the tent to the opening in the wall where the gates had once been.

All the preparations were directed by a fat, bearded man in a striped blue-and-red robe held in by a wide belt orna-

mented with silver. A black turban encircled his woolen cap which resembled a rolled stocking. This man was the res-saldar—captain of the squadron. He sat at the entrance to the tent with his knees widespread, giving terse orders in a nasal voice.

The silent and thoughtful Bobo-Kalon was reclining on pillows inside the tent. He seemed to be so deeply engrossed in thought that he was oblivious of everything going on about him.

That night Kendiry had calmly counselled him to pronounce himself Khan and to meet the ruler of Yakhbar in a manner fitting his estate. A refusal to do so would represent so grave an insult that Aziz-khon would be forced to drive all the inhabitants of Siatang across the Great River, where he would distribute their wives and daughters among the basmachi. Bobo-Kalon spent the night in meditation, and with the first rays of dawn gave his reply to Kendiry: "Let it be so. I am the Khan!" With a brief remark as to his confidence in the wisdom of Bobo-Kalon, Kendiry straightway dismissed the latter from his mind. Now the old man was free to think of whatever he pleased until the arrival of Aziz-khon.

Kendiry himself hoisted a small awning to the right of the Khan's tent and set up his crude barber shop. There he sat as dirty and ragged as ever, unhurriedly shaving the beards of the basmachi. To all appearances there was nothing in the world that interested him except his modest calling. Even the basmachi could not make out why the res-saldar should have allowed a despicable Siatang barber to set up shop next to the luxurious tent of the Khan.

From the very dawn some twenty basmachi drilled the inhabitants for the triumphal reception of Aziz-khon. Nauruz-bek was given a fine black horse on which he led the basmachi to the homes of the followers of the Preordained, who met them with deep bows and their blessings. After explaining to them the ritual of meeting Aziz-khon, the horsemen went to the homes of the faqirs, whom they drove out of their houses with whips and threats, forcing them to the former shop of the merchant. The women were ordered to take tambourines with them while the men took their lutes and wooden pipes. Ringed in by horsemen, the crowd of faqirs

stood waiting for further orders. The faces of some of them were streaked with red scars. The children cowered at their mothers' legs, while the crowd was for the most part silent. Occasional outbursts of whispering were immediately silenced by the vigilant horsemen.

Once more Nauruz-bek appeared before the people, calling upon them to greet the Khan with "quiet and joyful singing," with a jingle of tambourines and a playing of pipes and lutes in praise of this benefactor who had come to save them from unbelief and a violation of the Preordained. Everyone knew that as soon as the ceremonial was over and Aziz-khon had rested, a trial would be held of all those who had "led the people to a violation of the Preordained." For that reason no one dared utter a word of protest.

The drums once more began to sound when several newcomers came galloping up the canyon trail and tore past the crowd toward the fortress. The followers of the Preordained immediately went out to the wastelands and took up places along the trail, while their wives and mothers appeared in festive attire upon the roofs of their houses. Urging their horses forward, the basmachi formed a line from the fortress to the wastelands.

From beyond the cliff came the sharp, prolonged blare of a trumpet. Aziz-khon was approaching.

As soon as the triumphant horsemen appeared in single file from behind the cliff, a round of gunfire came from the fortress and the beating of the drums increased, while the valley was filled with the rhythmic jingle of tambourines played by the women on the roofs. Nauruz-bek and his followers drove their horses into the crowd of faqirs with the cry, "Down on your knees, despicable ones! Sing and rejoice!" The people fell on the stones beneath the whips of the horsemen, and forced themselves to sing in raucous voices. Without so much as a glance at them, the followers of the Preordained passed by and took up their places on either side of the path with arms uplifted in silent greeting.

Aziz-khon moved slowly forward surrounded by his suite. He was mounted on a graceful white horse covered with a bright saddlecloth embroidered in silver. He himself was wearing a flowing green robe embroidered in gold. Beneath this robe could be glimpsed another one of Bokhara silk.

His wide velvet trousers were thrust into soft red boots with very high heels and pointed soles. On his head he wore a small green turban likewise embroidered in gold. All this fine attire, designed for only the most august occasions, had lain for years in his trunk. But in this hour of triumph, who would dare remind the Khan of his lean years? For now he cut no less striking a figure than he had in the heyday of his power.

The only detail out of harmony with the grandeur of Aziz-khon at the given moment was a white, bloodstained bandage which crossed his cheek diagonally from his left ear, covering half his swollen mouth and his entire chin, while his half-closed right eye kept constantly twitching. In spite of his supercilious air, Aziz-khon was evidently suffering great pain.

The curiosity of the people was roused by this bandage as they watched him ride past. The freshness of the blood stains indicated that the injury must have been inflicted that very morning.

Aziz-khon rode along calmly, without glancing to either side, enjoying the pomp of his reception and a contemplation of his own greatness. Zogar was riding a huge grey horse on Aziz-khon's left. His pale, perverted face was full of scorn and cruelty. He was wearing a blue sleeveless coat over a white muslin shirt and red trousers, and his tan boots were of the same style as those of the Khan.

Two old men in white Siatang robes followed behind. One of them was stout and handsome and kept glancing about with sly little eyes. He was the khalifa, representative of the pir who had run away from Siatang. The other was as straight and thin as a ramrod. He had a fierce gaze and proudly lifted his beard, which was dyed a bright red an inch or so from the roots. The people of Siatang immediately recognized him as sayid Safara Ali-Izzet-bek, cousin of Bobo-Kalon, who had left Siatang some years before.

These two old men with their black-bearded bodyguard were followed by the dilapidated remnants of the Siatang nobility. Familiar names were whispered among the faqirs lying along the path: sayid Mursal-i-Hosro, mir Hassan-Shakhzade, mir Hakim-Shukrullo-Nazar, and sayid Fakhr-Ali.

The long line of horsemen was brought up by a caravan of heavily loaded donkeys driven by a dozen ragged young basmachi armed with flintlocks.

Apparently the crowd of faqirs on bended knee was too restrained in the expression of its joy, for soon a swishing of whips and a striking of rods was heard. The women beat their tambourines more energetically and the men strummed more insistently on their lutes, drowning out the sound of sobbing and weeping. None of the high-stationed horsemen so much as glanced at the faqirs.

As soon as Aziz-khon reached the merchant's shop, the elder followers of the Preordained bowed deeply before him. A few old men ran forward one after the other and kissed the stirrups of his horse. Aziz-khon graciously lowered his right hand to enable them to kiss his fingers.

When the entire procession had passed, the supporters of the Preordained followed it to the fortress. The drums and tambourines continued their frantic beating. Upon the wall of the fortress appeared warriors who greeted the procession with bows and inarticulate ejaculations.

On reaching the half-ruined gates where the rug-strewn pathway began, Aziz-khon stopped his horse and gazed significantly at the tent. The ressalidar suppressed the shock of seeing the bandage on Aziz-khon's face and raised the flap to allow Bobo-Kalon to emerge. When he had come out, the old man stopped, drew himself up to his full height and stood gazing at the highborn guest who had come to visit him. Silent and severe, poorly dressed in comparison with Aziz-khon, Bobo-Kalon took not a single step toward the latter. For a second it seemed that their meeting would be hostile. But Aziz-khon slowly dismounted, and with an effort to twist his swollen lips into a smile, walked down the pathway with his arms crossed on his chest in a gesture of prayer. Bobo-Kalon crossed his arms in similar fashion and advanced toward him with half-closed eyes. They met in the middle of the pathway.

"Blessings upon the faithful," muttered Aziz-khon, making an effort to overcome his pain. "My eyes are gladdened by the sight of you, good friend Bobo."

"The Protector has been gracious to us, Aziz!"

They both stretched out their right hands according to

ancient tradition and kissed each other's fingers. Then they drew back and stood as though admiring each other. After this they embraced and would have kissed, had not the bandage on Aziz-khon's face made it possible only to touch cheeks.

Everyone was impressed by the warmth with which they greeted each other. Those who accompanied Aziz-khon likewise dismounted and paid their respects to Bobo-Kalon.

On catching sight of Kendiry standing humbly under the awning of his barber shop, Aziz-khon pointed to the razor and indicated that the barber was to follow him into the tent.

"What has happened to you, my dear Khan?" asked Kendiry in lowered tones as soon as the tent flap fell behind them. "Did you have a fall from your horse?"

"No. Just a trifle," answered Aziz-khon evasively as he let himself down on his pillows with a frown. "You must shave my beard. It is full of blood."

Kendiry quickly unwound the bloodstained bandage and carefully examined the jagged wound and dark swelling disfiguring the Khan's face.

"Have your teeth been injured?"

"Yes. Three of them knocked out."

"Too bad." Kendiry stuck his head through the opening of the tent and said quietly, "Clean water and a silk turban for the noble Khan."

Zogar brought in the water and took the turban off his own head. Then he went out.

Kendiry washed the wound and shaved around it, after which he tore the turban into strips which he used as a fresh bandage.

"Is she here?" asked Aziz-khon softly.

"In the tower. Safe and sound."

"Thank you. Is everything else in order?"

"Everything. You may rest now, my dear Khan. For three days you must not talk and try to eat only liquid food."

Aziz-khon rose and went out of the tent while Kendiry bowed respectfully and whisked back to his barber shop.

"Bring the food over here!" cried the ressalidar, indicating the circle of guests disposed on rugs. Strains of wild music broke out as the cooks appeared with a five-foot wooden

platter piled high with steaming plov. Others brought a huge skin swinging from poles on their shoulders and filled with a cool drink made of sour milk and water mixed with oil.

Presently Zogar handed Aziz-khon a white robe embroidered in gold flowers. The Khan rose and touched Bobo-Kalon on the shoulder. With a twinge of pain Aziz-khon addressed him in the following words:

"My dear friend and brother in the true faith, Bobo-Ismail-Kalandar-Kalon, now Khan of Siatang, I beg you not to despise the poor gift I bring you, for it expresses the respect in which we all hold you, wise and worthy Bobo-Kalon!"

Bobo-Kalon rose and once more embraced Aziz-khon, who placed the robe on his shoulders. Then he bowed low in response to the deep bows of all the guests. He said not a word in reply, but raised his cupped palm to his lips as though whispering into it words meant for Aziz-khon alone.

Once more everyone sat down upon the rugs and the feasting began.

4

After Nisso had run off and been captured by the bas-machi, Mariam, who knew nothing of her friend's fate, rushed into Sho-Pir's room and took from his table drawer the few documents belonging to the Village Soviet. She ran with them into the orchard, where she hid them under a rock and then returned to Gulriz. Together the two women set out for the village to join Hudodod and the others, but on hearing firing coming from the fortress and the cries of the faqirs, Mariam realized that the people had already abandoned the village and were probably on the path to the Upper Pasture. Gulriz advised Mariam to escape.

"I am an old woman. Nobody will touch me. If they come to our house I shall say that neither Nisso or anyone else is here. Then they will go away. What else can they do? But you run and hide among the rocks. Steal from one rock to another until you get as far away as possible."

Had Mariam been more experienced she would have taken this wise advice. But she objected that there was grain stored in the house for which she was responsible, and that anyway she could not leave Gulriz alone. She also

said that she would certainly shoot if the basmachi came near. They would not know who was shooting—a man or woman or even several people. She had more than a hundred cartridges. Soon the moon would come up and she could distinguish anyone who approached. It was necessary only to hold out until morning, when the basmachi were sure to go away.

Mariam recalled the swift and daring night raids of the basmachi in the section from which she came—raids which had taken place years before. But Mariam forgot that in those parts the basmachi had always made their escape before dawn because they were afraid of the swift vengeance of the Red Army men. Here there was no one to fear.

Mariam left Gulriz in the house while she went to the new room, where she piled the sacks of grain against the door and the window. Before she had finished, a band of horsemen came galloping into the orchard. Mariam took cover behind the sacks, hoping that the horsemen would ride on. But with a clatter of swords and rifles and a shower of curses they drew up alongside the porch.

"Hey you, despicable ones!" they shouted. "Come outside, whoever is in there!"

A few of the men jumped off their horses and approached the house with their rifles on the ready. Mariam heard Gulriz shout, "There is no one here but me, an old woman!" This was followed by a shuffling and cursing, a short sharp cry from Gulriz and the splintering of a door being forced open. Without a thought for herself Mariam took aim at one of the mounted basmachi and fired. He clutched his left side with a cry, and slid off his horse. The remaining horsemen immediately dispersed in all directions. At first Mariam thought that all of them had left, but presently she heard stealthy steps on the roof and soft voices conjecturing as to where the shot could have come from. The wounded basmach lay groaning beside the porch, while his horse kept tossing its head in the effort to free itself from the reins entangled in the rider's arms.

While the basmachi searched the house Mariam lay motionless among the sacks of grain. It was so hot that she kept wiping the perspiration from her brow, and she was overwhelmed by a sense of fear and despair. She wanted

to crawl away somewhere where no one could find her. But there was nowhere to go. She would be immediately caught if she ran out into the yard, so she bit her lips until the blood ran and decided to put up a fight to the very end.

Several of the basmachi surrounded the room where she was hiding and came crawling up to the door and window. Thrusting their rifles between the sacks of grain, they gave a few shots which brought a shower of clay down on Mariam's head. She stuck her revolver into one of the openings and waited. Presently someone's hand appeared on one of the sacks. Mariam shot. With a howl and a rain of oaths the man fell back, and immediately Mariam was deafened by a hail of shots. Some of them landed in the grain, others whistled beneath the ceiling, but Mariam remained unharmed.

The teacher returned shot for shot until her revolver went blank. With trembling fingers she tore open the cardboard box containing her supply of cartridges, and tried to remove the blank ones from her gun. She could not get them out with her fingers and began to push them out with a little ramrod.

The basmachi also stopped firing. In her nervous impatience, Mariam became oblivious of everything except her task. Had she glanced up she would have seen the head of a man who had crawled along the roof to the smoke hole. He slid noiselessly down onto a sack of grain and threw himself upon Mariam. Feeling his hands on her neck, she struggled to free herself, desperately pressing the trigger of the now useless revolver. The man tightened his hold until Mariam's hands fell limply beside her and the revolver dropped to the floor.

"Hey! Do not shoot! I have caught her! There is no one else here!" shouted the man as he pulled the sacks away from the window.

Had they not taken Mariam for Nisso, they would surely have killed her. But in their joy at having captured Aziz-khon's runaway wife, for whom they expected to receive a sizable reward, they only gave a few oaths and struck her with their whips.

Having made sure that there was no one else in the house, they left Gulriz lying on the porch unconscious from a blow

in the chest and tied Mariam onto one of their horses. Then they went over to their wounded companion lying in the yard and turned him over. He was dead. They exchanged a few brief remarks as they threw his body over one of the other horses, and slowly trotted down to the village. The wounded Yakhbarian rode behind, groaning and cursing as he nursed the hand he had wrapped up in his turban.

When Mariam came to, she found herself in Bobo-Kalon's tower. She did not comprehend where she was or what had happened. Her arms and legs were bound and her body ached unbearably. She groaned. Through her hazy consciousness she could hear Nisso repeating her name.

"Mariam . . . Mariam. . . ."

The sound became ever louder and more insistent.

"I am here, Nisso," said Mariam with an effort. "Where are we?"

"In the tower, Mariam. In the fortress. You have been here for a long time already. Were you unconscious?"

"I guess so."

"Have you any broken bones?"

"They seem to be whole. I shot and killed one or two of the basmachi."

"Are you also bound?"

"Yes. Did they beat you?"

"No. They just threw a sack over my head—as soon as I left you. First they kept me there among the rocks and then they brought me here. Is Naná alive?"

"I do not know. I heard her cry and fall. Can you crawl over to me?"

"I shall try."

With a great effort Nisso rolled over to where Mariam was lying.

"Let me try to gnaw through your ropes."

"Go ahead."

Nisso turned and twisted until her face came in contact with Mariam's hands.

"Can you turn over on your side?"

Mariam turned with a groan.

"Does it hurt?"

"Dreadfully."

"You are all wet. Is it blood?"

"Maybe. Is this convenient for you? Bite at the knots."

Nisso found the ropes binding Mariam's arms, and after much gasping and spitting she finally had them loose. With another groan Mariam raised her numb hands.

"There are snakes here," said Nisso. "While you were lying there like dead, one of them crawled over my face, but it did not bite me. Now you try to free my hands. Here they are. Does it hurt you again?"

"Not much. Turn so that I can reach you. That is right."

Mariam had little trouble untying the woolen cords. When her hands were free Nisso felt Mariam's face and body.

"There are long welts on your body. Probably whips?"

"I do not remember. . . . Can you hear? The drums are very close now. What shall we do if they come here?"

"I do not know. Do you think they will kill us? They will surely kill us."

"They will kill me because I shot at them. . . . Aziz-khon will probably take you back. Have you seen him?"

"No. I will never give myself up! Let them kill me too!"

"What if they torture us first?"

Nisso remained silent as she untied Mariam's feet. When the ropes fell off, she began untying her own. Mariam tried to sit up, but fell back with a moan.

"I do not want them to touch me," said Nisso.

"What shall we do?"

"I tell you what—we must kill each other. When they come for us we shall both be dead. Then they cannot torture us. I am not afraid to die."

"Neither am I."

"But maybe it would be better to try to escape first."

Mariam did not reply. She knew that she was unable to move.

"Feel the walls," she said at last.

Nisso crawled over and felt the uneven stones of the mortarless wall. In circling the room, she came to the door beyond which could be heard men's voices. Nisso listened. Then she felt her way back to Mariam.

"No, we cannot escape, Mariam. I want dreadfully to live."

"So do I. I never thought a thing like this could happen."

"Neither did I. How could we kill each other? If I took a stone—maybe I could manage to get one out of the wall—and strike you with it. . . . No, I could never kill you, Mariam. Could you kill me?"

Mariam did not reply and both of the girls remained silent for some time.

"There is something I want to tell you, Mariam. Now I can tell you. I love Sho-Pir. What do you think will happen to him? Will they kill him too?"

"I cannot tell, Nisso. Maybe he will escape."

"He is strong. If they fall on him he will first kill many of them. I love him."

"I know, Nisso. I had already guessed. Does he love you?"

"He? He. . . . Now I can tell you. He also loves me. He told me so himself that night when he went away and I ran off to him. Out there on the trail. . . ."

"Out there on the trail . . . Baktior, Karashir and the others. . . ." said Mariam thoughtfully. "Is it possible that they have killed all of them?"

Again there was silence.

"I thought I would be happy," murmured Nisso as she sat there next to her friend. "I was almost happy."

"What would you have done if this had not happened?"

"Oh, I would have done lots of things!" cried Nisso eagerly. "I would have married Sho-Pir. I would have said to him: let us go to the Volost and then further and further until we come to Moscow. I would have seen everything and found out how great people live. I would have gone to school and learned how to live so that there would no longer be wicked people in the world. I—I do not know exactly what I would have done, but I know I would have done many fine things!"

"Do you not feel sorry for Baktior?"

"You mean—if this had not happened?"

"Yes, if this had not happened."

"He would have found himself another wife. He is a good man. But now—now I am afraid, Mariam."

"I understand, Nisso. I suppose this is the end. If I die

and you remain alive—who can tell—you may remain alive—”

“No, I shall not remain alive.”

“But just in case you do, you will never forget me, will you?”

“Never, Mariam.”

“Then you must go to the city of Ura-Tepe and find the district committee of the Komsomol Organization. Ask for a man named Mukhamedzhanov Irmat—he has black eyes and black hair. Tell him how I died. And also tell him—” Mariam’s voice dropped almost to a whisper—“tell him that I loved him. Will you do this?”

“Why should you ask me, Mariam? They will kill me too.”

“Maybe, Nisso. That is possible. But if they do not kill you, will you tell him?”

“Yes, I will. But what shall we do now, Mariam? Are you unable to get up? Does it still hurt?”

“Yes.”

“Where?”

“Everywhere. My head and my chest and my stomach.”

“What have those wretched dogs done to you! If only I could kill Aziz-khon! What if we suddenly open the door and run away? Let there be a fight and let them kill us straight off! That will be better.”

“Of course it will. Here, kiss me and I will try to get up.”

Nisso gently embraced her friend and kissed her on the lips. On drawing away she felt her hands sticky with Mariam’s blood.

“Get up. I shall help you.”

With a suppressed moan Mariam pulled herself up on her knees and then Nisso helped her to stand.

“I shall throw myself at the door and as soon as it opens you run out.”

“All right. Kiss me once more.”

Again the friends embraced.

“I—I—oh, Mariam, I should like to see the sun once again! But whatever must happen, will happen. Can you stand?”

“I am standing.”

Nisso crossed to the far side of the room and with all

her strength rushed at the door. It immediately flew open. Nisso fled out of the tower, but after the first step Mariam fell down.

"Hold her! Hold her!" cried two basmachi as they threw themselves at Nisso. But she slipped past them and continued her flight. In front of her roared a huge bonfire about which the basmachi were sitting. They immediately jumped up and seized the fugitive, who bit and scratched and tried to snatch a knife from one of them. Holding her hands and throat and shoulders, they quickly bound her and dragged her back to the tower. Others bound Mariam and dragged her back likewise.

The door slammed. There was nothing but darkness. Nisso wept as she lay face down on the stone floor. Once more Mariam had lost consciousness and was softly moaning.

5

The feasting lasted until noon of the following day. Several times Aziz-khon sent runners to his sentinels stationed at the entrance to the valley. Each time the runners returned to state that all was quiet. Patrols rode up and down the canyon trail.

News of the location of the caravan was passed from one to another. Already the caravan was approaching the mouth of the Siatang River, and during the afternoon should enter the canyon. No doubt it would pitch camp for the night on the small plateau where a mountain stream joined the river.

The caravan might reach the village late the next morning. The runners informed Aziz-khon that it consisted of thirty packhorses and thirty-one donkeys. Two other Russians were coming with Sho-Pir. One of them was small and thin, the other big and fat and kept changing his mount from a horse to a donkey and back again. Each of the Russians had a rifle, as did the leader of the caravan. The other nine drivers were unarmed. No one in the caravan had the least suspicion of what had transpired.

On receiving this information, Aziz-khon ordered the ressalदार to place men in ambush as soon as it became dark.

The feasting ended; the basmachi were sated with the

rich food. Aziz-khon announced that everyone must now have a good sleep, for great matters could not be decided until they had thoroughly rested from their march. The most distinguished of the Yakhbarians stretched themselves out on the blankets and pillows brought to Aziz-khon's tent from the houses in the village. All the others, except the sentinels, lay down on rugs and felt mats or simply on the rocks along the walls. The day was sunny and quiet, without a cloud in the sky; there was nothing to worry about, and so the fortress was soon filled with the peaceful snoring of the basmachi.

Aziz-khon's left eye soon swelled shut. He covered it with a corner of the bandage and would have joined the others in sleep had he not decided first to have a look at Nisso. He left the tent and slowly crossed the yard without paying the slightest attention to the basmachi who jumped to their feet to make way for him, bowing respectfully and throwing open the door of the tower which immediately became flooded with sunlight. Aziz-khon stopped on the threshold and saw Mariam and Nisso lying next to each other bound hand and foot. Both the girls blinked in the unexpected light.

Aziz-khon looked narrowly at Nisso with his one, unwinking eye.

Nisso met his gaze tight-lipped and without raising her head. As he watched the girl, he wondered whether it was fear that made her eyes shine so feverishly. Nisso's dress was torn at her breast, at her side, and at her hip. When he saw the blue welts caused by the ropes, Aziz-khon turned to the guard and said softly,

"Unbind her and bring water and plov."

The guard bowed and ran to the ressalدار. Aziz-khon turned and left the tower without so much as a glance at Mariam. Slowly he went back to his tent engrossed in deep thought. He had not yet decided how he should behave toward Nisso. He thought the best thing to do would be to kill her: not simply, but after prolonged torture. In the meantime he would get his fill of pleasure from her. If she should repent before the whole people and pray for mercy, he might even take her back with him. But once they were back, he would have them dig a hole in the ground with a roof admitting

only a single ray of sunlight. She would live in this hole and think only of him, weeping and imploring for either release or death. And this would continue throughout the years until he died. Of course there could be no thought of making her his wife. She had disgraced him, and this was never to be forgiven. But let it be known throughout the High Mountains how he had punished her while yet permitting her to live! And let everyone fear and obey him!

But first she must be tried before the whole people and made to repent by means of threats and intimidations, so that all should see how merciful he was in sparing her life.

Aziz-khon entered the circle of sleeping old men in his tent and lay down on the quilt which had been spread for him. But he alone of all his people could not sleep.

After lying restless and irritated by the pain of his injury for some two hours, Aziz-khon nudged the sleeping Zogar and said:

"Tell the ressalدار to summon all the people here. We shall make our decisions now."

6

The moment had come for the people of Siatang to meet Aziz-khon and his warriors face to face. The resplendent Khan was sitting on pillows before his tent with his feet crossed and his hands clasped over his belly. The only young person in his suite was Zogar, who was sprawling unceremoniously to his left. On his right sat Bobo-Kalon, stern and straight, engrossed in mystic contemplation. He was wearing the robe embroidered in gold and silver which the Khan had presented to him. The rest of the Yakhbarian nobility, along with the mirs and sayids who had returned to Siatang, formed a semicircle on rugs about the Khan. Behind them and at either end of the semicircle stood the armed warriors of the ressalدار.

The inhabitants of Siatang were crowding silently against the fortress wall opposite the Khan. The followers of the Preordained sat up front on felt mats and rugs, while the faqirs and their families—those violators of ancient law—had taken up positions on the rocks behind. The only inhabitants of Siatang whom the basmachis had not driven into

the fortress were the children and those who had been so badly beaten that they were unable to move.

Ten armed guards paced up and down the fortress wall with their eyes on the canyon-men.

The rest of the yard was empty, except for a large square rug in the very centre on which sat the khalifa, Mirso-Hur. Nauruz-bek and the ressaldar. In front of them lay scrolls of brown paper.

Kendiry sat alone and unnoticed in his barber shop to the right of the Khan's tent. He kept watching proceedings with an imperturbable calm and the cold interest of a bystander. It was his conclusion that the Khan hoped to impress the people of Siatang by his elaborate preparations for the forthcoming ceremony.

Zuaida, Fish Bones and Gulriz were among the faqirs. The head of Gulriz was bound in a white rag and great bruises welled beneath her sunken eyes. She knew nothing of the fate of Baktior, and while she believed that he was still alive, she could not free her mind of torturing doubts.

The unsaddled horses of the basmachi were lined up along the canal in the back of the yard. Several grooms walked the length of a taut rope sprinkling feed for the horses on the rocks. The feed consisted of that very grain which the canyon-men had treasured all winter long, but which early that morning had been stolen from Baktior's house by the basmachi. Unopened sacks stood piled against the mill, which the basmachi had turned into the Khan's kitchen. In front of the mill lay the hoofs, entrails and bloody hides of slaughtered sheep.

The canyon-men gazed sullenly at the remains of their cattle and at the scattered grain over which there had been so many quarrels in the course of the year. The cattle which was still alive had been driven into an old fold above the fortress, but the canyon-men realized that they could not hope to get back a single goat or sheep or cow. Each of the faqirs was regretting having deprived himself of food, of having so carefully nurtured each newborn goat and been so sparing of every grain of wheat. How much better it would have been to have filled their bellies during that long and difficult winter! How much better to have ended the winter with nothing, than to see their stores gobbled up in a single

day by this insatiable horde of basmachi! Each of the faqirs was now recalling his long years of labour, his talks with Sho-Pir and Baktior, his family quarrels and his thwarted hopes of a rich harvest and a peaceful, well-fed life. In a single day everything had been swept away as though by a hurricane. There was no longer anything to hope for. The former life with all its hardships had returned. The sayids and mirs who had run away were now sitting in front of the faqirs; they would never forget or forgive, and their vengeance would know no bounds.

The canyon-men had nothing to whisper among themselves. The same thoughts occupied the minds of all as they sat there silently watching the rifles of the soldiers. Even many of the followers of the Preordained began to question whether life would be better for them now. The soldiers had taken all their grain and cattle, all their implements and household belongings, and there could be no hope of ever seeing them again.

The followers of Bobo-Kalon had always considered him wise and just. They knew that he had no love for foreigners. All the more incomprehensible did it seem to them now that he should be sitting there on the right hand of Aziz-khon dressed in the rich robe which the latter had presented to him. Why did he make no protest? Why was he so calm in the face of the wrongs being perpetrated against the canyon-men—the stealing of their possessions and the violating of their persons? Could it be possible that thoughts of vengeance were harboured by this old man who had been reduced to poverty before their very eyes—the only one of all the highborn inhabitants of Siatang who had not abandoned his home? Perhaps now, when the hour of vengeance had struck, he was exulting no less than the sayids and mirs and Aziz-khon himself, who had always despised the people of Siatang. What would they be told now? Why had all the canyon-men been driven to this place with whips and threats? What new decrees could they expect? For what forms of vengeance should they prepare themselves?

Silence. The only sound to be heard was the suppressed laughter of the soldiers as they whispered among themselves. What was Aziz-khon waiting for?

At last two basmachi appeared with coils of thin, strong

rope in their hands. They crawled along the fortress wall toward the ancient leaning tower and helped each other climb up the side. The eyes of all the canyon-men were fastened on them. Why were they climbing the tower? What did they intend to do there? They kept climbing from stone to stone, higher and higher, until at last they reached the landing on the top. As they began to uncoil their ropes and fasten them to the stones, some of the observers began to guess the purpose, but were loathe to admit it even to themselves. Suddenly two long ropes came swinging down over the leaning wall. The ends did not quite touch the ground. A third soldier went over to the ropes and deftly tied nooses into the ends. Then the two on top of the tower pulled them up until they swung slightly higher than a man's head. Everything immediately became clear to the canyon-men. A wave of whispering spread over the frightened crowd. One word came to the minds of everyone: "Who?" Once more a strained silence settled down.

The nooses swung in the air. The two basmachi up on the tower sprawled on the narrow landing and began to lazily observe what was happening below, from time to time laughing at their casual observations.

Suddenly the khalifa began to address the gathering from where he was sitting in the centre of the courtyard. Everyone immediately turned toward him. Thrusting out his beard, the khalifa rolled up his eyes as if to say, "Behold me, the ambassador of heaven, through whose lips are spoken the words of heaven itself."

"Praised be the Protector! Thrice praised be the Protector!" he pronounced slowly. "May the holiness of the Godhead, dispersed among the souls of creation, remain inviolable! In everything from earth to heaven, from dust to sun, from the blind stalk to the vast mysteries of Mind, true believers find the glorification of His inscrutable Will. May His wrath be visited on the faithless who violate His eternal laws! The wind of folly has swept through our land, driving before it clouds of sin. But once more the stars have become visible and the moon is shining. I behold your radiant souls. Let us praise Aziz-khon, mighty ruler of the realm of the High Mountains and champion of the true faith, as well as all the soldiers of truth who have driven the clouds

from your souls! All of this has transpired during one night, and as you all see, the blessed day has dawned with a new light. Once more happiness has come to you. Once more the great merits of the Preordained, which only yesterday were scoffed at by unbelievers, stand firm and unshakable. May the punishment of the Protector fall upon the guilty! According to the true law, all simple people are freed from the responsibility of praying, for only the initiate are worthy of communicating with divine forces. According to the true law, the pir must pray for all of you, for he alone has mastered the sacred words. You are responsible only to bring him one-tenth of your harvests and profits. Formerly I gathered this holy tithe every year and presented it to the pir. For four years it has not been my lot to tread the path leading to Siatang, and many sins have accumulated here during those four years. But during all this time the pir has kept on offering up prayers for you, transmitting a portion of his own wealth to the bearer of the living spirit of god in place of your tithes. Praised be the generosity of the pir! But today the hour has come when of your own free will you will return to him all that he so willingly sacrificed on your behalf. Surely there is not one of you who would risk having the pir refuse to offer up prayers for his soul, thereby calling down the wrath of the Protector on his head. To avoid such disaster, all of you must contribute what is due for those four years and one more year in advance. The sum amounts to half your possessions and is to be rendered in a single payment. But god is merciful. The half which remains in your possession will be multiplied many times over, and you will become happy and prosperous. Those who have no grain will pay in cattle. Those who have no cattle will pay in robes and hides. But are not you yourselves aware of what you had best contribute? Do I speak the truth, faithful ones? Answer my question, to the glorification of the Protector!"

The khalifa narrowed his eyes on the crowd of canyon-men and waited in silence as he impressively stroked his beard.

But even the followers of the Preordained dropped their heads and said nothing.

"Answer me!" repeated the khalifa with a flash of his little eyes.

No one had the courage to break the silence. Issof glanced surreptitiously at the grain scattered before the horses, at the rugs decorating the Khan's tent, and at the entrails lying in front of the mill. He gave a long, loud sigh.

"Would you like to say something?" the khalifa asked quickly. "What is your name, man?"

"What do you want with my name? I have nothing to say."

"You have nothing to say?" repeated the khalifa with challenge in his tone. "Do you not consider it a great privilege to contribute half of your possessions to the bearer of the living spirit of God?"

"I have no possessions," said Issof. "The soldiers of truth have already taken my sheep."

"Did you not give them to the Khan of your own accord?"

"They took them," insisted Issof stubbornly. "They also took my rug—there it is hanging on the tent. And they took my clay pots. I have nothing else."

"Ah," said the khalifa insinuatingly, "have you no wife?"

Issof realized the point of this question and made no reply. The khalifa stooped down and whispered something to the merchant Mirso-Hur. Then he turned to Issof once more.

"Why do you not answer? I perceive that your soul is still under the shadow of the sin-cloud. But I shall help you with your reply. Do you not count your wife Saukh-Bogor your most precious possession? Where is your wife, Issof?"

"I do not know, worthy one," answered Issof sullenly. "I am a true follower of the Preordained, and my wife is also a true follower. But last night she took to the mountains. When the soldiers of truth came in the dark of the night, she did not know who they were and was so frightened that she ran away."

The khalifa turned to the ressalidar.

"Is it true that some people escaped?" he whispered.

"They are lying, worthy one," replied the ressalidar, disguising his annoyance with a feigned yawn. It would scarcely be fitting to admit that the "soldiers of truth" had refused to pursue the fugitives up the face of the cliff.

"Very well," announced the khalifa. "We shall continue our talk later, Issof. I see that others are also reluctant to speak. I know very well that a lump comes into the throat in the fullness of one's joy, so that it is difficult to immediately find fitting words. This evening you will begin to bring your contributions here, faithful ones. And may you receive the blessing of the Protector! Now the worthy merchant Mirso-Hur would have a word with you."

Everything was clear before he even began his speech. The canyon-men continued to remain silent while Mirso-Hur ran his fat finger down the list of debts accumulated by each of them. For a long time he stood reading out the list, calling each debtor by name and enumerating everything for which he owed the merchant, down to the last handful of dried mulberries, the smallest pinch of powdered dye, each needle and pin. As he continued reading, the faces of the canyon-men became more and more indifferent. A whole life of labour would not suffice to pay the khalifa and the merchant what they demanded.

But when the merchant finished and the judge Nauruzbek rose to his full height to announce that according to the true law debtors and dissipators of their property were obliged to sell their wives and daughters, a murmur rose among the crowd of canyon-men. "There is no such law," they shouted. "For a long time there has not been such a law!"

"Thieves! Plunderers!" shouted the women boldly. Fish Bones ran out into the centre of the yard and tore the robe off her breast.

"Sell me!" she shouted to the merchant. "Beat me! Kill me! Where is my Karashir? Where is Nisso? Where is Mariam? Death to us and curses on your heads, you black dogs!"

She fastened her fingers in the merchant's beard and it would have gone ill with him had not the ressaldar made a sign to several basmachi who threw themselves at the crazed woman. She struggled in their grasp but did not release her hold on Mirso-Hur's beard. When at last they tore her away from him she spit in their faces. They felled her with a lash across her shoulders, then dragged her by her twisted arms across the courtyard. A crowd of canyon-men

rushed after her, but on being confronted by the line of raised rifles, they fell back slowly and huddled at the fortress wall.

"Leave them alone," said Aziz-khon in the silence that followed, and the basmachi reluctantly dropped their guns and took up their former positions.

"Behold this offal!" said Nauruz-bek, indicating Fish Bones, who already lay bound at the foot of the tower. "Behold this source of all abomination! Who does not know her and her criminal husband Karashir? We shall place such as her on trial, if—" (here Nauruz-bek bowed to the suite of Aziz-khon) "if the contemplation of the godless is not too painful to your gaze, most worthy ones. It is now time for the trial to begin."

Aziz-khon beckoned to Nauruz-bek, who hurried over and bowed before him. After whispering brief instructions, he nodded to the ressalidar, and immediately some twenty "soldiers of truth" with pointed rifles surrounded the crowd of faqirs.

Nauruz-bek returned to the centre of the courtyard and sat down next to the khalifa, while Mirso-Hur, rubbing his badly damaged beard, crossed the yard and sank with a sigh behind Bobo-Kalon.

The door to the tower was opened and the basmachi led out Mariam and Nisso with their hands bound behind their backs. Two of the basmachi held Nisso by the elbows, while a third walked behind with the sharp edge of his scimitar pressed against her shoulders. Mariam was brought in the same way. Both the girls were pale and their clothes were badly torn. They squinted in the sudden daylight. Mariam could scarcely lift her feet, but Nisso walked with her head thrown back, and her step was so light that it seemed she was borne forward by an act of will, rather than by her poor swollen feet. Upon her breast gleamed the pin containing the head of Lenin.

Utter silence reigned in the courtyard. The basmachi led the girls to the rug spread in the centre of the yard and turned them to face Aziz-khon. At a nod from the Khan Nauruz-bek ordered the soldiers to untie Nisso's hands. Mari m's knees gave way under her, but the sword-point under her chin forced her to remain standing.

"Praised be the Protector!" said Nauruz-bek, pressing his hands to his breast in a gesture of prayer. "Praised be the Protector! Praised be his goodness in punishing the godless for the salvation of the godly! Before you now stand two women of whom we shall speak separately. The worldly name of the first of them—behold her, everyone!—is Mariam, daughter of Dauletov. We do not know him, but cursed be the hour when he conceived this devil's offspring in the harlot's womb. Why did she ever come here? Who is she? Her sins are too numerous to be recounted in a whole day. Shamelessly she put in her appearance dressed in men's clothes, as all of you witnessed. On the day after her arrival she helped the hated Sho-Pir and Baktior to rob the worthy merchant who is sitting here among us. Having herself learned to write the language of the godless, she led astray the wives and daughters of the faqirs by teaching them to read and write, a thing contrary to the will of the Protector. She shouted that she was a Komsomol, and we who had never heard the word before, learned only too well its meaning. I do not care to enumerate all the abominations of which the woman standing before you is guilty. I shall mention only one: this night she committed a crime unheard of in the realm of the High Mountains. She killed one of the soldiers of truth, may his name be sacred forever! With a shot from her tiny gun, she killed our warrior and defender of the faith, Lutfullo. There he lies behind the fortress on his funeral bed. Tomorrow the soldiers of truth will sadly bear him to Yakhbar, where he will be buried like a saint in his native soil. The soul of Lutfullo is already in Paradise, from where he watches us in the expectation that justice and vengeance will be his. This offspring of the devil tried to kill another soldier of truth, but the Protector diverted the foul bullet from his heart. Only his hand was injured. Come here, Yakub, and show us your wound!"

Nauruz-bek silently held out his hand to one of the basmachi sitting in front of the tower. The latter got up, and everyone could see the bloody rag wrapped around his hand. Mariam swayed, and it required a great effort of will to keep her chin from dropping on the point of the sword. Had she attempted to utter a single word the sword would have pierced her throat.

Nisso could see nothing but the swollen blue welts on Mariam's neck. Nisso's pale face seemed utterly calm.

"Here, Yakub! Come here!" cried Nauruz-bek.

With lowered head the thickset soldier came slowly toward Mariam and stopped in front of her, looking her dully in the eyes.

"Take this knife, Yakub," said Nauruz-bek gently. "Not at your hand will she meet her death, but it is only fair that the first blow should be yours. Behold, true believers! Let everyone witness the great justice of the merciful Protector, bringing death to all violators of the Preordained. Death, death, death to this woman! Glory to the Protector! Rejoice, true believers! Nothing is more holy than his wrath, annihilating the poisonous seeds of unbelief! Gouge out her eyes, Yakub!"

A great gasp came from the crowd. The guard held up the swaying Mariam and silenced her blood-curdling cries by clapping his hand over her mouth. Other basmachi held Nisso by the arms and shoulders as she struggled to reach her friend.

In a calm, matter-of-fact manner Yakub stuck the knife into each of Mariam's eyes. Blood streamed down her face and over the hands holding her mouth, trickling down to the ground. Two rifle shots stopped the faqirs who had surged forward. The hysterical cries of the women rose above the crowd, above the fortress, above the whole Siatang Valley. The blood-spattered basmachi were already dragging Mariam to the tower, where they tossed a loop around her neck.

From the centre of the courtyard Nauruz-bek made a sign and the two basmachi on top of the tower pulled the rope. . . .

Mariam hung above the ground, slowly swinging and turning. When her lifeless body became motionless and the rope stopped swinging, the courtyard was again filled with utter silence. Perspiration streamed down the stony faces of the canyon-men, not one of whom was capable of taking a deep breath. Nisso, who was now lying prone upon the rug, was seized with trembling.

Aziz-khon sat calmly on his pillows while Bobo-Kalon kept his eyes on the ground. Gulriz sank her teeth into her

hand and groaned softly. As Kendiry glanced coldly at the swinging body, he made the mental comment that his work forced him to witness certain unpleasant sights, but that in the final analysis all this had nothing to do with him.

"And so," said Nauruz-bek at last, as though calling attention to his own existence, "the will of the Protector has been executed. Rejoice in your hearts, true believers! Now we shall speak of the second woman. Soldiers of truth, raise this unfaithful wife who has attempted to cast a shadow on the honour of the great Aziz-khon, renowned throughout the High Mountains! Get up, Nisso! Get up and look about you! We shall not list your crimes. Do you see that second noose? It is waiting for you. What have you to say?"

As they raised Nisso, she looked wildly about her.

"Leave her alone! Leave her alone!" cried Gulriz suddenly, rushing across the courtyard and falling at the feet of Aziz-khon before anyone had a chance to stop her. "Leave her alone, Khan. Kill me, but do not touch her. What do you want with her life? I adopted her as my daughter. I have no daughter of my own. You have had enough blood; take my old blood and give it to the dogs if you are so inhuman. Take pity on Nisso's beauty. Behold her! How like a flower she is!"

"Stop it, Naná!" cried Nisso. "At whose feet are you lying? Before whom are you pleading for mercy? Get up! Take pity on me in my last hour! Get up! I do not want you to degrade yourself! Let me die; I am not afraid of death! Get up, Naná! Get up, get up! Do you hear? Get up!"

All eyes were fixed on the wrathful face of Nisso who now stood tall and straight. Such strength was expressed in her proud scorn that the basmachi loosened their hold on her arms.

"Get up, Naná, or I shall denounce you forever!" cried Nisso, stamping her foot.

Slowly Gulriz got up and came toward Nisso with extended arms, like one under a spell. She embraced the girl with the tenderness of a mother and kissed her on the forehead.

"May your name be blessed throughout the ages," she whispered, and then turned and staggered away unseeing, her hands covering her distorted face. The crowd silently

made way for her. The weeping Zuaida put her arm around the old woman's shoulder and pressed her to a seat on a ragged robe spread by one of the faqirs. Gulriz collapsed and Zuaida drew her lifeless head to her breast.

All the basmachi including Aziz-khon watched this in silence. Nisso was now standing facing the crowd—straight and sorrowful and inexpressibly calm. Perhaps for the first time in his life Kendiry forgot everything else as he watched her, so great was his admiration. Only Nauruz-bek kept angrily chewing his dry lips and pulling at his beard.

Once more the two hasmachi seized Nisso by the elbows. She did not resist.

"What do you wish to say, Aziz-khon?" The voice of Nauruz-bek sounded uncertain in the silence.

"Let her come here," said Aziz-khon.

The basmachi pushed Nisso. She turned and calmly went over to the Khan, stopping before him and looking into the one eye which remained unbandaged.

Aziz-khon removed the bandage from his swollen lips.

"Do you realize that death is the only fitting punishment for you?"

"Let it be so," replied Nisso with determination.

"You will be hanged like that other."

"Let it be so."

"Have you no desire to live?"

Nisso frowned. "I hate you."

Aziz-khon grimaced, but took himself in hand.

"A woman's love, like her hate, is passing and inconstant. Look into the eyes of the righteous people gathered here. All of them have come to one conclusion: you are guilty of a crime, the punishment for which is—death. In the eyes of the Protector there can be no other law. But you were possessed by madness. Devs took possession of your soul, and according to the true law devs can be driven out by remorse and repentance. Repent and declare your desire to be faithful, and I shall reward you with your life. I myself shall ask the holy pir to make supplication to the Protector in your behalf. Perhaps the Protector will perform the miracle of restoring you to your reason. Fall on your knees and beg for my help!"

Nisso stood silent, with trembling lips. The mercy of Aziz-khon was worse than death; she realized what would happen to her if she remained alive.

"Fall on your knees!" repeated Aziz-khon under his breath. "Great is my mercy!"

A wave of malice surged over Nisso. Aziz-khon was begging her to fall on her knees before the whole people! Let him ask once more! Let him ask, so that she could laugh at him!

"Fall on your knees," repeated Aziz-khon for the third time.

Nisso continued to remain silent. Aziz-khon's one eye became round with fury, and deep furrows appeared on his brow. He felt the gaze of a hundred people centred on him. Already he had been too easygoing; everyone would laugh at him.

At this moment Zogar, who had been viciously following Nisso's every gesture, jumped up and seized her by the arm, hurling her down with such force that she fell on the very feet of Aziz-khon.

"Humble yourself, accursed one! It is Aziz-khon himself who is speaking to you!"

"Ha!" exclaimed the Khan, grabbing Nisso's arm to prevent her from getting up. "We shall yet teach you to be obedient! Step back, Zogar. I see that she has decided to repent. That thing—what is that thing on your breast?"

Dropping her hand, Aziz-khon reached toward the pin containing the head of Lenin. Nisso covered it with her hand.

"Do not touch it, worthy one!" cried Nauruz-bek. "That is the sign of the Komsomols. Do not touch it!"

"Show it to me, I want to see it," said Aziz-khon slowly, pulling Nisso's hand away. "I perceive the face of a man. And you wear it over your heart? Come here, Zogar. Take that thing carefully and trample it under your feet. Do you mean to say that you are a Komsomol, despicable one?"

The tension under which Nisso had been holding herself suddenly broke. In wild fury she tore her hand from Aziz-khon's grasp, seized the pin and stabbed him in the face before he had a chance to realize what was happening. Had he not struck her forcefully over the hand in time, the pin would have pierced his eye.

"Yes, I am a Komsomol! But you—you—"

Several of the basmachi seized Nisso and hurled her away from the Khan. She fell. In the extremity of his rage, Aziz-khon was incapable even of crying out; he could only stand there trembling and holding his wounded cheek while the foam bubbled in the corners of his mouth. With a single gesture he pointed to the rope hanging from the tower. Nauruz-bek hid his satisfaction as he nodded to the basmachi, who ran up to Nisso with tilted rifles and dragged her over the stones to the gallows. There they hauled her to her feet and slipped the noose over her head. The crowd of canyon-men became noisy. Gulriz gave a wild shriek.

Suddenly Kendiry rushed across the courtyard and pushed away the basmachi. Seizing the noose, he severed it with one blow of his razor, so that it fell off Nisso's neck.

"Wait! Wait!" cried Kendiry to one of the basmachi who had lifted his sword against him. "Aziz-khon himself will give you orders."

The soldier irresolutely dropped his sword.

"Do not surrender to a moment's madness, oh wise and renowned Aziz-khon! This woman must be killed, but not at this moment and not in this way! Too great are her crimes! She must be dragged throughout your realm, that all may have the satisfaction of spitting upon her. Imprison her in the tower today and think over your decision. Do not take the words of the humble barber for impudence, but favour him with your grace."

Aziz-khon was not used to taking orders. He was still trembling with rage and wanted nothing so much as the immediate execution of Nisso. He would never have allowed anyone else to interfere with him at this moment. No one but—Kendiry. Only five of the people present—Bobo-Kalon, Mirso-Hur, Nauruz-bek, the khalifa and the ressaltar—knew the barber's true identity. For all the others, Kendiry's words represented the brazen request of a beggarly barber.

But Aziz-khon knew only too well that he was completely dependent on this man and dared not defy him.

"You are right," replied the Khan, taking himself in hand to the amazement of all those gathered there. "I recognize the truth uttered by this despicable beggar. Never has

there been a Khan who remained deaf to words of truth, even though uttered by a worm. Let me not be the only one to spit upon this woman, but let all of my people do likewise. Drag her to the tower!"

7

As soon as Nisso had been led away, Aziz-khon rose from his pillows and abruptly entered his tent, abandoning the soldiers and the canyon-men. Nauruz-bek was so taken aback that he did not know what to do next. The canyon-men quietly prepared to leave the courtyard and no one took measures to stop them. The crowd began to disperse.

In hushed tones the basmachi began talking among themselves, and the whispering extended to the immediate followers of Aziz-khon.

Suddenly the ressaldar got up and from the centre of the yard ordered the guards not to allow anyone to leave the fortress.

Everyone stood waiting for Aziz-khon to reappear.

But he did not come out of his tent and no one dared glance inside.

The body of Mariam swung in a light breeze. Fish Bones lay abandoned on the stones behind the tower.

Suddenly a rider galloped into the fortress yard. He jumped off his foaming steed, glanced around in search of Aziz-khon and then pushed his way past the people into the tent.

Presently Aziz-khon looked out and beckoned to the ressaldar.

"The caravan did not stop for the night. Take all your men and go meet it," he ordered tersely.

Immediately everything was in a turmoil. Basmachi ran about cursing and flourishing their weapons as they saddled their horses. The ressaldar mounted and rode off, loading his rifle as he went. Some twenty horsemen followed him, while others surrounded the remaining canyon-men and drove them down to the village. Threatening death to anyone who dared leave his house, they then dashed on after the ressaldar.

The remaining basmachi left the fortress singly and in groups, lashing their horses over rocks and ruts in their

fear of coming in late for the rich booty. Nauruz-bek, Mirso-Hur and the khalifa, well knowing the ways of the basmach, also set out at a modest pace with Aziz-khon at their head. A few disgruntled soldiers were ordered to remain behind to guard the tower and stolen goods.

Once again the courtyard of the fortress was empty. Bobo-Kalon, who had not uttered a word the entire day, was left sitting in melancholy solitude among the pillows strewn in front of the tent. Kendiry left his barber shop and walked up and down the yard with his hands behind his back, glancing from time to time at the remains of the feast, or at Mariam's dark, distorted body swaying on the rope, or at the basmach sitting near the tower.

Sometimes he thought of Nisso, whose life he had saved so that at some time in the future she might represent convincing proof of his loyal service, if such proof were required. But he was mainly concerned with planning further moves in the carefully calculated diplomatic game which so far he had played without error. The fate of the caravan did not interest him in the least.

Suddenly Kendiry noticed the tousled head of a woman among the stones behind the tower. It immediately disappeared, but he kept watch out of the corner of his eye as he pretended to be studying the mountain peaks. The guards were sitting on the other side of the tower and could not have observed her.

Once more the head appeared for an instant, and Kendiry recognized it as Zuaida's. But since he was interested in discovering her purpose in being there, he gave no sign that he had noticed her. Zuaida kept advancing stealthily behind the rocks of the river embankment. Kendiry moved over towards the tent, and sat down on a rock with his elbows on his knees as though overcome with fatigue. But he continued to watch Zuaida through his fingers and discovered that she was trying to reach Fish Bones, who lay at the foot of the tower. This was a very risky thing to do, for the basmach would make short work of her if they discovered her here. In order to reach Fish Bones, Zuaida had to leave the shelter of the rocks and cross an open space in the yard some ten metres wide. She crouched behind the last rock for a final look around. Apparently she was disturbed by the sight of

Kendiry, but he kept on sitting motionless as though lost in thought.

Zuaida made her decision. Dashing swiftly over to Fish Bones, she lifted her up and with a great effort carried her back to the rocks.

Again with an eye to the future, Kendiry got up and coughed. Zuaida glanced around as she ran, so that she stumbled and fell, together with her load, and lay motionless, her terrified eyes fixed on the approaching Kendiry. But with the semblance of a smile on his expressionless face, the barber placed a finger to his lips and walked slowly away. It was important only that Zuaida should know he had seen her.

When he returned from having circled the tower, neither Zuaida nor Fish Bones was anywhere to be seen. With the greatest satisfaction Kendiry mused over the fact that he had acquired a new trump, though not a very high one, in the intricate game he was playing.





CHAPTER TEN

1

FOR TWO days Mir-Ali, servant of Aziz-khon (that same Mir-Ali who once had led Nisso's mother Rozia-Mo from the settlement of Duob), had been lying in wait with fifteen other basmachi among the rocks where the Siatang River joins the Great River. Aziz-khon had ordered him to follow the caravan stealthily when it put in its appearance, thus cutting off its path of retreat.

Mir-Ali was very exact in carrying out Aziz-khon's order. The caravan had turned into the Siatang trail from the bed of the Great River, and now Mir-Ali was secretly following it into the depths of the canyon.

By the end of the day the straggling caravan was approximately halfway between the mouth of the Siatang and the village. Sho-Pir was riding up ahead. Every once in a while he would turn in his saddle to glance behind at the long line of packhorses.

In some places the path was so narrow that the heavily laden beasts had difficulty in passing. Their left-hand packs balanced above the roaring river, while their right-hand packs caught on the rocks of the sheer cliff. The horses proceeded along the very edge of the precipice, rolling their eyes as the pebbles slipped from under their hoofs and splashed down into the river. Whenever they came to the most treacherous places, Sho-Pir stopped the caravan and helped the drivers lead the horses one by one to safety. Twice during the day which had just passed it had been necessary to unload the horses and carry the packs on men's shoulders over dizzying heights.

The fat doctor Anufriev rode at the heels of Sho-Pir on a large donkey. He was not used to the mountains and suf-

fered from dizziness. Whenever the trail skirted the edge of the cliff, he became pale and gave despairing ejaculations. Since he could not go on foot and was afraid to ride horseback over such a road, Sho-Pir had given him this strong and even-tempered donkey. Anufriev felt better on the donkey. He did less complaining and even carried on a light conversation with Sho-Pir when the latter dismounted and walked beside him, allowing his horse to proceed of its own accord.

The rear of the caravan was brought up by a Komsomol named Deikin, who had been sent to open up the first co-operative store in Siatang. Deikin remained undaunted by the dangers of the journey. He was in an excellent mood inspired by the wild beauty of the canyon. He hummed a little tune as he admired the sharp granite peaks, the foaming rapids of the river, the stones over which his little horse stepped so carefully, the long line of donkeys strung out ahead of him, led by horses which kept disappearing behind the cliffs along the trail.

The closer the caravan came to the village, the more Anufriev tortured Sho-Pir with senseless questions. He wanted to know what kind of an apartment he would have in Siatang, whether or not the roof would leak when it rained, whether he could find rugs to hang on his walls, whether Sho-Pir had suffered from fleas and mosquitoes. Sho-Pir had long since become bored stiff by the man, but he answered all his questions good-naturedly since he had no desire to quarrel with the doctor and was sure that as soon as the latter lost some of his excess weight, he would stop worrying about many of the things which now seemed such problems.

"So you say that Dauletova herself got my dispensary ready for me?" continued the doctor. "What shall I do about a water supply? Will you extend the canal, or will we have to carry it in pails? Sick people require a lot of water, you know. I am afraid we shall not be able to bring enough in pails."

"I suppose we can extend the canal," replied Sho-Pir absent-mindedly, placing his hand on the crupper of the donkey pacing alongside of him. "No sense in worrying over nothing, Anufriev."

"Is it true that Dauletova is satisfied with her life here?"

I can scarcely believe that she has fixed herself up so comfortably."

"What particular comfort does she require? She has fixed herself up to her satisfaction. We are good friends."

"To be sure, what does she require?" grumbled the doctor. "She is not old like me. Do you suppose I would ever have come here if it were not for the money? She came here just for the thrill of it. I had all I could do to put her off last autumn—kept dragging me off with her to the village. She has a will of her own, that girl! I even began to be afraid of her. I am not sure how we will get along together out here in Siva—Sio—Phooh! I can't for the life of me remember what you call it! Out here in this Siutung of yours!"

But at this point the trail narrowed and Sho-Pir was forced to dismount and walk up ahead to figure out whether or not the packhorses and donkeys could be allowed to go through without delay. Once more Anufriev became pale and dropped behind. Sho-Pir was thankful to have a brief respite from his chattering.

As he glanced about to get his bearings, it seemed to Sho-Pir that very soon—just beyond the next cliff—they would come to the cave where he had left Nisso nineteen days before. She had been constantly on his mind ever since, and he longed to see her.

He tried to divert his thoughts by imagining what the Spring Festival which began the day after tomorrow would be like. It was a happy coincidence that the caravan would arrive on the very eve. To be sure, today's march had been too long; it would have been better to have stopped somewhere for the night and continued to the village on the next day, but the only clearing appropriate for pitching camp was already far behind them. The only thing for them to do now was to get on without delay. Soon the trail would widen out, and once the moon came up the horses could make their way without accident. They would probably reach the village by midnight.

Sho-Pir rode far ahead of the caravan to examine the trail. Suddenly he came to a halt: it seemed to him that he heard a distant shout. Yes, someone was actually calling, but he could not make out where. Perhaps it was up ahead, or perhaps Deikin was calling from the rear of the caravan.

Sho-Pir glanced about and listened. A small stone fell onto the trail from somewhere up above, causing Sho-Pir's horse to shy. What could that mean? He looked up and began to examine the cliff towering beside the path. On one of the eminences he made out the figure of a man dressed in a native robe. The man was waving his arms to make himself seen.

"How in the world did he ever get there?" marveled Sho-Pir, unable to conceive scaling such heights. Sho-Pir was gifted with exceptional eyesight, and now as he looked it seemed to him—indeed there could be no doubt about it—the man was Karashir! What could he be doing in such a place?

Sho-Pir waved to him.

Karashir shouted at the top of his lungs, but the wind carried away his voice. Once more he shouted and kept pointing in the direction of Siatang.

"A—a—a—ee—ee—ee! A—a—a—ee—ee—ee—! A—a—a—ee—ee—yo—oo!" was all that Sho-Pir could make out. Again and again Karashir repeated his cry, and Sho-Pir saw him make gestures indicating the pointing of a rifle, and the cutting of his throat. Straining all his senses, Sho-Pir finally guessed rather than heard the words:

"Basmachi! Basmachi! Aziz-khon!"

When Sho-Pir repeated the words, Karashir confirmed them with a shake of his head and a waving of his arms. Sho-Pir glanced around and saw the doctor on his donkey round the cliff followed by the entire caravan. He beckoned to Karashir to descend, but immediately realized the impossibility of such a thing.

He did not wish to believe such dreadful news, yet the very appearance of Karashir in such a spot was convincing proof of its truth. Sho-Pir's face flushed darkly. He swung his rifle off his shoulder and loaded it. When he was sure that he had been understood, Karashir disappeared. Sho-Pir searched for him with his eyes, but the wall of the cliff was as empty as before.

Once again Sho-Pir became his old self—a Red Army man quick in his calculations, ready for danger, full of confidence. He made a lightning appraisal of the situation: the path was so narrow that it was impossible even to turn the caravan around; on the left yawned the precipice with the

river at the bottom: on the right towered the cliffs. Any attack here would be disastrous. A panic would be sure to end in catastrophe, for the frightened horses would push each other over the edge. In no way could the caravan be defended against shots or stones rolled down from above. But since Karashir was up there, the basmachi must be elsewhere, and indeed it was hardly probable that they could climb to such a spot. The attack would probably come from up ahead, which meant that the caravan must not continue its course. But if they could reach the cave it would afford shelter for at least the men. It was doubtful that the basmachi would kill the pack animals, for they would be too anxious to seize the caravan. The best thing to do would be to block the trail with rocks and take up positions in the cave, from which they could fire. They had three rifles—Sho-Pir's, Deikin's, and Anufriev's—as well as the hunting gun Sho-Pir had given the caravan leader. But they had few cartridges—only sixty in all, twenty to a rifle.

Sho-Pir touched his horse with the reins and rode away at a quick trot, once more leaving the caravan behind. His face bore a look of deep concentration as he glanced sharply on every side, ready for any emergency. The trail was just as narrow on the other side of the cliff. There above the path yawned the opening to the cave. Only thirteen men accompanied the caravan, and the cave would probably accommodate all of them.

Sho-Pir jumped off his horse as he reached the cave and began feverishly blocking the trail ahead of it with big stones to form a barricade. Meanwhile the caravan reached the spot, and Sho-Pir noted the puzzled surprise on the men's faces.

Within a few minutes everyone had heard the news. Doctor Anufriev grew pale and his thick lips trembled. He began to stutter in his fright, and kept muttering that they should abandon the caravan and escape back along the trail. Deikin was also pale, but he remained calm. The caravan drivers were gloomy and sullen. But all of them unquestioningly obeyed the orders of Sho-Pir. At least they would not be taken off their guard, thanks to Karashir. Quickly the men unloaded the horses, placing the packs on the ground between the beasts in order to isolate them from each other and save the goods in the event that some of them should

perish. The entrance to the cave was half blocked with stones from behind which the men could fire. After leaving orders to shoot in case of attack, Sho-Pir left to reconnoitre. He followed the path, searching for the slightest possibility of scaling the heights from which Karashir had called. Perhaps the ambushade was somewhere far up ahead. Perhaps the entire road to the village was free. He could see this from up above, since the sun had not yet set.

But he had climbed only a short distance when he heard a shot followed by a second and a third coming from somewhere behind the caravan. Could it be that the basmachi were in the rear? Sho-Pir turned and ran back. Suddenly a shot came from close at hand, whizzing past his very ear. This meant that they were here too, up ahead.

During his short run back to the cave the bullets pitted the stones in front and behind him.

"Hurry, hurry!" cried Deikin.

Sho-Pir grasped the hands that were held out to him and was pulled into the cave. The doctor sat huddled in the farthest corner with his teeth chattering.

"Take your rifle!" shouted Sho-Pir, catching sight of the doctor's firearm lying at his feet.

Anufriev picked up the gun and turned it helplessly in his hands.

"You milksop!" cried Sho-Pir. "Give it to Mamadzhan if you cannot handle it yourself!"

Anufriev gladly handed over the rifle to the tall caravan driver. With a grin the latter slid the breech-lock back and forth and took his place behind the stones at the entrance. From behind the cliff rushed the first horseman. Sho-Pir took careful aim and the man fell out of the saddle, retaining his rifle in one hand and clutching at the air with his other. After striking the embankment, he continued falling until his body disappeared in the river. A rain of bullets came from behind the cliff. Sho-Pir's wounded horse rose on its hind legs, attempted to turn around, and fell backwards over the precipice. A dull splash came from below.

"Don't waste any shots," whispered Sho-Pir to Deikin. "Save your bullets. You see they cannot reach us."

The path up ahead was empty. The path behind, as far as the jutting cliff, was filled with horses separated

by their packs. The pack donkeys were hidden by the cliff.

The next bullet felled Anufriev's donkey, which had been standing below the entrance to the cave and now rolled down into the river. The basmachi stopped firing, apparently realizing that the people hidden in the cave were not to be reached by bullets. The only thing to break the silence there was the suppressed sniffing coming from where Anufriev huddled in a far corner with his hands over his face.

Sho-Pir cautiously glanced out and saw several of the basmachi stealing from horse to horse, from pack to pack. Perhaps they thought it a sly scheme, but just let them get close enough! Sho-Pir nudged Deikin. Mamadzhan also noticed them.

The three basmachi came almost to the last pack and fired at close range. But Sho-Pir was well covered. Thrusting the muzzle of his rifle between the stones, he screwed up an eye and waited. The shaved head of one of the bandits came into sight. Calmly he pressed the trigger and the head disappeared with a piercing shriek.

"Aha! One down!"

The bullets of the other two basmachi cracked against the stone vault of the cave.

"I'll show them!" cried Deikin, jumping up in a burst of indignation. But his cry was cut short by a groan; his rifle dropped from his hands and he fell on the floor of the cave with blood streaming down his livid face.

"Go see what has happened to him, do you hear, Anufriev, you son of a bitch?"

Sho-Pir turned away and took aim at one of the basmachi who was making a rush for the cave. He fired at his shining brown forehead. The basmach fell, squirmed along the path and disappeared over the edge of the precipice.

The third crawled away behind the packs.

Once more silence reigned in the cave. With trembling fingers Anufriev touched Deikin's blood-soaked hair. Deikin was dead, and the doctor stood gazing down at him so idiotically, that it made Sho-Pir's blood boil.

Suddenly a large white rag appeared from behind the cliff and was waved by someone taking cover there. Final-

ly a fat, white-bearded old man in a turban and a blue-and-red silk robe came out, holding the rag above his head.

He was the ressalدار, but no one in the cave knew him. Slowly and calmly he advanced. He was unarmed.

Sho-Pir allowed him to come within twenty steps of him.

"Halt! What do you want?"

The old man stopped and raised his hand.

"I know who you are. Do not shoot. I would speak with you. Listen to what I have to say and let your people listen."

Sho-Pir was about to pull the trigger of his rifle, but Mamadzhan placed his hand on the barrel.

"Why shoot? You can shoot later. Let us hear what he has to say."

The caravan drivers stood pressing against each other to get a better look at the old man. Sho-Pir glanced around and saw Anufriev hastily tying a red-cross band to his arm.

"Why are you doing that, doctor?"

"They never shoot doctors," muttered Anufriev through white lips.

"You skunk!" muttered Sho-Pir. Then turning to the ressalدار he said, "Go ahead and speak; we are listening."

"You have twelve men with you, Sho-Pir," said the ressalدار haughtily as he crossed his arms on his chest. "No doubt you have already suffered casualties. Aziz-khon himself—may he live in peace—has ordered me to tell you that there are many of us—two hundred men with two hundred rifles. You and your people have only three. We rule over Yakhbar and we rule over Siatang. All the people of Siatang sing the praises of our Aziz-khon. God has helped him bring the light of truth to the High Mountains. Who will help you in the High Mountains? You must be mad, you and your followers, to resist the will of our Khan. You may remain here for a day, for two days, but your end is certain. We shall not shoot, nor shall we send the soldiers of truth to face your bullets. We shall build a great fire and choke you to death like mice in a hole. Who can prevent us from doing this thing? But Aziz-khon is merciful, and these are his words: why should we kill him, once he submits? Let him live. We shall not touch him. I say to you, Sho-Pir, and to those who are with you: give us your weapons and we shall not touch a

hair of your heads. Behold the sacred 'The Face of Our Faith.'" Here the ressalдар took from his robe an ancient book in a torn leather binding. "Our Khan swears to you on this book as do I myself. See how my lips touch it. May the words pronounced over its pages be held sacred forever! Give us your weapons and depart in peace wherever you wish. And may the Protector bestow his blessing on our great and merciful Khan. You are as free as a camel whose nostrils have not yet been pierced!"

"He is swearing on the holy book," whispered Mamadzhan to Sho-Pir. "Do not shoot, chief. No one who believes in god would violate an oath taken on the holy book. Tell him to go away and we shall consider his words."

"There is nothing to consider," said Sho-Pir tersely. "Have you lost your senses, Mamadzhan?"

Mamadzhan glanced at the other caravan drivers and they all began to speak at once.

"Let him go away and we will think it over. He speaks the truth."

"Of course," cried the doctor impatiently as he got up from beside the body of Deikin. "There is no reason for losing your temper, my dear comrade. Tell him to go away so that we can discuss the matter."

"You are a bunch of fools," exclaimed Sho-Pir in exasperation, but realizing the futility of trying to convince them, he waved to the ressalдар and cried, "Go away and wait for our answer."

The ressalдар turned with a scornful laugh and strode off to the basmachі waiting behind the cliff.

A heated argument began in the cave. In vain did Sho-Pir become indignant. In vain did he insist that the basmachі would kill them all if they gave themselves up. In vain did he claim that they could hold out in the cave for several days, and that sooner or later help was sure to come: once Karashir had managed to warn them of their danger, there could be no doubt that he was not now sitting up there with his arms folded. The caravan drivers who were natives of those parts had deep faith in an oath taken on the holy book, while Anufriev was a frank and shameless coward. No one even listened to Sho-Pir's assertion that it was more

honourable to die fighting than to be tortured to death by the enemy.

"You can stick here if you like," said the doctor maliciously. "But we shall leave and give up our two guns. Only a fool would stick his head into the fire of his own accord. If we stay here we are sure to be killed, whereas if we give ourselves up the chances are that we will remain alive. There is nothing to argue about. They are human beings like the rest of us. Why should they harm us? They want the caravan and not us. If we cannot defend the caravan, why should we try to make heroes of ourselves? I am a doctor—here is my red cross—they know what that means. Enough of our arguing. Here is a white flag—show it to them!"

Anufriev took a roll of bandage out of the medical bag hanging at his side and unwound it with a jerk. He would have rushed with it out of the cave had not Sho-Pir stopped him.

"Hold on!" cried the latter, catching him by the arm. "You have a right to do whatever you please and no one will stop you. Whoever wants will go out to them. But I shall remain here and keep my rifle. Since I shall be fighting single-handed, you must hand over all your cartridges to me."

"If we refuse to give up our cartridges. . . ." began the doctor, but Mamadzhan interrupted him.

"All right, chief," said Mamadzhan. "The cartridges go to you. You want to die. As for us. . . . You are a brave man and will surely land in Paradise. You probably have no wife or children. We have wives and children and want to live. When we reach the Volost we shall tell the commander. Give me your hand, chief. . . ."

Mamazdhan grasped Sho-Pir's hand tightly in his own, and then in a sudden impulse stooped and kissed it.

"Do not be angry with us. We shall pray for you. When life and death meet on the cliff, the upper road goes to the brave."

One after another the caravan drivers shook hands with Sho-Pir. The last of them murmured, "Allah will be merciful to you."

When Anufriev held out his hand, Sho-Pir said contemptuously, "They are fanatics, but you are simply a son of a bitch and a coward! Go lick the heels of the Khan!"

The doctor swallowed the insult, and Sho-Pir made no attempt to prevent him from waving his white bandage outside the entrance to the cave. He merely stuffed his pockets with the cartridges which were handed over to him and took up his place behind the rocks at the entrance with his loaded rifle on his knees. With a frown he watched the caravan drivers march single file to the cliff with the doctor tagging along behind. Several of the basmachi headed by the ressalदार came out to meet them. After taking the two rifles from Mamadzhan, they led the prisoners behind the cliff.

Sho-Pir's hunting gun with a dozen charges of grapeshot remained in the cave with him. He placed it on the ground beside him and with a deep sigh covered the trail with his rifle and made ready to hold out.

Soon the basmachi made another attack. They crawled up the path from left and right, while some of them swam the river and climbed the bank in order to take up positions directly opposite the cave. Sho-Pir was well sheltered by the rocks and counted every bullet, careful not to waste a single shot.

Twilight quickly descended, reducing the contours of the cliffs to vague shadows. Sho-Pir's only concern was to prevent anyone from slipping up on him unexpectedly.

Sometimes the shooting of the basmachi died down, only to break out again with new fury. Several times they tried to throw heaps of dry brush in front of the entrance to the cave, but Sho-Pir brought down anyone who approached. But soon bushes which had been torn up by the roots began falling down onto the path from somewhere up above, and he could do nothing to prevent the pile from growing. "Anyway," he thought, "they will never be able to light it."

When the heap of brush was so high that it reached the level of the cave, Sho-Pir grabbed the barrel of his hunting gun and reached out from under cover in the hope of beating down the pile. That was just what the basmachi had been waiting for. Immediately there came a rain of bullets. He felt a sharp pain in his left shoulder and his left arm dropped limp at his side. He crouched down and noticed the blood on his shirt. Realizing that he had been wounded, he ripped off his shirt with a curse and reached for the doctor's medical bag, but at that moment the basmachi once more opened fire.

Sho-Pir rested the barrel of his rifle on a rock in order to spare his strength. Now it was difficult for him to handle the gun, and for the first time he missed as he fired at one of the basmachi across the river. A feeling of hopelessness overcame him. It was already quite dark, and Sho-Pir realized that soon it would be impossible to take aim. The basmachi kept up their blood-curdling cries and he continued to fire in spite of the fact that his supply of bullets was quickly dwindling.

Suddenly some sort of liquid came pouring down on the pile of brush. A few drops splashed on Sho-Pir. Kerosene. The basmachi had seized the kerosene packed on the donkeys in the rear of the caravan. Sho-Pir realized that his end was at hand. A strip of burning rag flashed down before his eyes and the pile of brush burst into flames, filling the cave with pungent smoke. Sho-Pir began to choke. He was overcome by weakness and tears filled his eyes, so that he could no longer fire.

Fully aware that this was the end, Sho-Pir hurled his rifle out of the cave. It arched through the darkness and landed with a splash in the river. Then with his good arm he pulled off his boots and rushed out of the cave, plunging barefoot through the fire and diving into the black waters churning at the foot of the cliff. Immediately the canyon was filled with the triumphant cries of the basmachi.

When the moon came up the newly-loaded horses began to move along the canyon trail once more, now driven by the soldiers of the ressalدار. The packs of the dead horses had been looted by the basmachi. Between the riders tramped the doctor and the caravan drivers, barefoot and half-naked, with their hands tied behind them. Each of them had a rope around his neck which was fastened to a saddle.

2

The wild snow peaks which until this time had been a place inimical to human beings, now became the only refuge for those who fled from the soldiers of Aziz-khon. The snows and glaciers and the frost-covered cliffs knew no spring. They were as inaccessible to warmth as to man. But people who hitherto had desperately feared the mountain devils and the wailing winds of the heights, now made their way singly

and in groups of twos and threes to the rocky spine of the range. Fortunately for the fugitives, the storm clouds had circled of late about only the highest peaks. The weather was clear and the winds had died down. Everyone strove to reach the valley of the Great River, hoping to find refuge in the border settlements along the trail to the Volost.

At noon Saukh-Bogor caught sight of Mariam's pupil Tufa and her mother on an adjoining height. They shouted to each other across the narrow gulley which separated them and decided to join forces. After several hours of climbing they met on the other side of the ridge bordering the Siatang River.

Karashir, who had been wandering over the slopes for two days, was on the same side of the ridge making his way toward the settlement. After having warned Sho-Pir, he resolved to find a place from which he could send stones toppling down on the heads of the basmachi. He looked up, and in the light of the setting sun saw some people making their way single file across a glacial slope. At first he took them to be basmachi, and watched them stealthily for a long time. But as they came closer he could see that they were women, and at last he recognized Saukh-Bogor. He came out from behind the rocks, shouting and waving his hands.

When the exhausted women finally reached him, he told them about the caravan and explained how he planned to aid Sho-Pir.

Already darkness was descending. From below came the sound of shooting.

Karashir and the women descended toward the Siatang River, which was as yet hidden beneath the ledge of the enormous drop. When at last they could get a view of the river, the firing had ceased.

The darkness deepened, and it was impossible to make out what was going on below. In the blackness of the abyss flickered the red reflections of flames. The women tried to guess who could have built a bonfire along the trail.

From this point it was possible to dislodge stones which would have caused a landslide, cutting off the path hidden by darkness and the cliffs. But the bonfire might belong to the caravan.

They decided to wait until the rising of the moon.

Karashir took advantage of the interval to tell the women what had happened when he and Baktior and the rest of the canyon-men had made their last repairs on the road, expecting to return to the village the next morning.

Baktior had sent Karashir ahead to search for a crowbar which had become mislaid under one of the ledges. After finding it, he was to wait for the rest of them along the trail. Karashir left in some chagrin, for he preferred having tea with the others to crawling under overhanging ledges. But it was Baktior's order and he obeyed. In spite of a long and careful search, he found nothing, and with a feeling of resentment against Baktior, he was about to climb back on the trail when he noticed a group of armed horsemen approaching. He drew back and watched to see who they were. The horsemen passed without his recognizing them. Once more he climbed down onto the trail and set out to meet Baktior. Suddenly he again heard a beating of hoofs and again hid. This time he saw that the horsemen were basmachi—a great number of basmachi. Among them Karashir recognized the sayids and mirs who had run away from Siatang, as well as an imposing black-bearded horseman in rich clothes with a bloodstained bandage on his face whom he guessed to be Aziz-khon. Karashir could hear the sayids cursing Baktior. When they had passed, Karashir kept sitting for a long time behind the rocks. One more rider dashed past, and that was all. Karashir returned to the place where he had left his comrades, but no one was to be found. The path was stained with blood, and he was very much frightened and decided to hide among the rocks. Finding a suitable place, he climbed up.

Here it was, just beneath them—the difficult path he had climbed. He had remained sitting where he was all of yesterday and today, keeping watch over the trail. More than once the basmachi had passed, headed now in one direction, now in the other. Then the caravan had appeared and Karashir had shouted his warning to Sho-Pir.

The moon came up as Karashir finished his story. The flames of the fire had died out. He and the women cautiously made their way down the cliff. The river shone in the moonlight, and they could make out the winding thread of the trail. Neither the caravan nor the basmachi were to be seen; everything was quiet. With bated breath they slid from

stone to stone, risking their lives every minute, until they finally came out on the trail not far from the cave. With their ears strained to catch the slightest sound, they made their way to the cave, hugging the base of the cliff. They entered and found the cold, stiff body of Deikin, which they dragged out into the moonlight. They could not identify him, but concluded he was Russian, and might therefore be a friend of Sho-Pir.

Karashir claimed that they must search for the others, who might be hiding among the rocks above or below.

The moon kept mounting higher in the heavens, flooding the canyon with bright light. Karashir looked about him carefully and glanced down over the side of the cliff. It was a sheer drop down to the river; there could be no thought of descending here. But to the left, where the ledge broke off, the river had been thrown back by a cliff, leaving a bank strewn with rocks. Thorn bushes darkened the steep embankment leading down to the riverbank at this point.

Karashir approached the cliff and found a verticle crevice down which he climbed as through a drainpipe, until he came to an obstruction ending in a short drop. He kept on sliding until he reached the river.

"Sho-Pir! Sho-Pir!" shouted the women from up above, but their voices were drowned by the noise of the river, and no answer was forthcoming.

Karashir made his way along the riverbank, wading through the water and holding on to the rocks wherever the bank broke off. In one place he found the mutilated, bloodstained body of one of the basmachi which had become reduced to a bag of bones. He appropriated the dead man's broken sabre. Further on he found a breech-loading rifle caught in the branches of a lone thorn bush. Karashir took this also. On examination it proved to be undamaged, and although the cartridge case was empty, its possession conveyed to Karashir a feeling of strength and importance.

On reaching a moonlit clearing, he called to the women and showed them the rifle and sabre. The women also left the trail and descended to the river, while Karashir rounded the cliff and continued his way along the bank. He kept going on and on, though he had lost all hope of finding those whom he sought. When he had gone more than a mile, he sud-

denly stopped, startled by the sight of a man lying face down on a small sandbank. His bare feet stood out distinctly among the pebbles in the light of the moon. He lay motionless.

With the thought that the man must surely be dead, Karashir carefully approached and bent over him. It was Sho-Pir. He gently turned him over and gazed into the pale, lifeless face. Then he wiped off the blood and sand and touched his left arm which hung in an unnatural pose. The arm was broken. In great agitation Karashir placed his ear to Sho-Pir's breast, and after listening for some time jumped up with the cry:

"It is beating! Praised be the Protector! It is still beating!"

Immediately he turned and began to shout at the top of his lungs:

"Come here! Come here! Sho-Pir is still alive! Come here!"

No one answered. Karashir dashed back, jumping crazily over the rocks and slipping into the swift stream, only to climb up onto the rocks again as he continued to shout:

"Hey! Hey! Come here!"

At last the women heard him.

They surrounded Sho-Pir lying unconscious on the sandbank. They sprinkled his face with river water, and poured it into his mouth drop by drop.

When at last Sho-Pir gave a deep sigh and opened his eyes, Karashir was so affected that he had to wink back his tears. Slowly Sho-Pir regained consciousness. He groaned and closed his eyes, then with a great effort forced himself to open them again. He tried to raise his head when he recognized Karashir and Saukh-Bogor leaning over him, but with a moan he again lost consciousness.

3

On learning that the Yakhbarian Khan had gathered a band of basmachi for the purpose of crossing the border in the region of the Siatang River, the commander of the Volost garrison ordered his assistant Shvetsov to set out at once with a group of twenty horsemen.

An hour later Shvetsov was moving down the Great

River accompanied by Maximov, the garrison doctor. The only equipment which their little detachment had taken with them on this risky long-distance operation consisted of two Chauchat machine guns and an old but trusty "Maxim"; two hundred rounds per man, a half month's supply of hardtack, an emergency supply of fodder in each fore saddlebag, and an old ten-mile map of the region, drawn up (as stated on the map itself) according to "oral information."

No Red Army detachment had as yet entered Siatang, for this little-explored region was considered to be peaceful.

For five days the detachment moved along the valley of the Great River at the swiftest pace to which the horses could be urged. It was important either to prevent the invasion by cutting it off at the mouth of the Siatang, or to completely wipe out the basmachs if they had already crossed the border. The Yakhbarian who had informed the garrison of the raid had been unable to give exact information as to the size of the band, saying only that it was not large, but armed with European weapons of a type he had never seen before.

Shvetsov had wanted to take the Yakhbarian with him, but the latter had fallen ill, making this impossible.

Early in the morning of the fifth day, Shvetsov led his men across the mouth of the Zarkhok River. Here he was overtaken by an old man in a ragged robe who with many gestures conveyed the fact that there were two men sleeping in his orchard who had run away from Siatang.

The men turned out to be Hudodod and his friend Abduraim. After reaching the Upper Pasture they had with inconceivable difficulty crossed the snows of the ridge and descended to this place through the Zarkhok River canyon in the hope of intercepting Sho-Pir's caravan and warning him of the raid. They had arrived just before nightfall in a state of utter exhaustion, and on learning that the caravan had already passed three days before, had fallen asleep in despair. Two other companions of Hudodod had frozen their feet and remained behind in the settlement of Zarkhok.

Now Hudodod and Abduraim were lying under a single blanket with their old flintlocks under their heads. After a long and difficult conversation during which Hudodod drew diagrams on the ground with a sharp stone in the effort

to make the Russians understand his words describing the region, it became clear to Shvetsov that in addition to the route along the Great River, the village of Siatang could be reached by a shorter route which, however, was almost inaccessible at this time of the year. It led halfway up the Zarkhok Pass to the little village of Zarkhok above which wound a pass over the ridge undesignated on the ten-mile map and accessible only on foot even during the summer. Was there any possibility that the horses could cross it now?

Hudodod shook his head in doubt as he recalled all the difficulties of this dangerous climb. At last he said that "if men and horses were stout of heart and not to be frightened by the snows above their heads," it was possible that the detachment would get through.

Shvetsov took Hudodod at his word and was greatly intrigued by the idea of bottling up the basmachi in the Siatang canyon. He conceived a plan of action according to which Sub-Lieutenant Taran was to take five men and the heavy "Maxim" gun and follow the Great River to the mouth of the Siatang in order to block the lowland trail, thus cutting off the retreat of the basmachi. With the rest of the men and Doctor Maximov, Shvetsov decided to cross the difficult Pass and to deal the basmachi a fatal blow by descending unexpectedly upon the village. Shvetsov informed Taran that if it proved impossible to cross the pass, the entire detachment would return and join him in the valley of the Great River.

In spite of his exhaustion, Hudodod agreed to guide Shvetsov over the Pass, while Abduraim went along with Taran.

Thus the detachment split into two unequal groups and moved off in different directions. Hudodod was given the horse on which the machine-gun discs had been loaded, and distributed the discs among the men. He rode just behind Shvetsov, chewing hardtack and studying the severe profile of the Russian commander every time a turn in the road offered him the opportunity. Hudodod kept thinking that there was little likelihood that this man would become intimidated by the difficulties of the Pass, but that there were too few of the Russian Red soldiers; it was quite possible that the basmachi would kill them all off.

By noon, after having rendered first aid to Hudodod's companions in the village of Zarkhok, Shvetsov's detachment set out for the foot of the Pass.

The snow peaks above them were wrapped in clouds and fog and seemed incalculably high. With the exception of two or three other cloud banks above neighbouring peaks, there was nothing to mar the blue of the sky.

Shvetsov frowned and twisted his yellow moustache as he ordered his men to begin the ascent. The Red Army men dismounted and led their horses by the reins. The abandoned path was littered with stones and rose in a steep zig-zag. In places it was crossed by wide ribbons of fluffy snow. The higher they rose the wider and deeper became the patches of snow until it covered the entire path. Men and horses slipped and fell, injuring themselves against concealed rocks. The path became steeper and steeper. Sheer drops appeared to right and left.

Now it became necessary to stop and rest more frequently. The soldiers found breathing difficult and gasped for air with wide-open mouths. The horses floundered in the snow and, in trying to free themselves, sank to their very bellies. The Red Army men pulled them out, sinking in themselves, falling down and staggering up. The sharp stones cut the hoofs of the horses so that they left a bright red trail in the snow.

In places where the snow covered not only the path but great gaps between the rocks as well, Hudodod and Shvetsov went ahead, digging away the snow with their hands in order to find solid ground. In the meantime the men threw themselves down for a brief rest wherever they happened to be. The mist-enwrapped settlement of Zarkhok was already far below, but the summit of the range seemed as distant as ever. When they reached a dizzying height, the path disappeared altogether. On either hand rose jagged, rimy cliffs.

The soldiers held onto the tails of their horses, but the beasts kept sliding back, unable to retain a foothold. Every moment they were in danger of plunging down into the abyss, but somehow they always stopped after sliding a few feet, regained their footing and kept moving forward.

No one said a word during the first four hours of the climb. The only thing to be heard in the frozen, crystal-clear air

was the gruff urging on of the horses, whispered oaths and words of encouragement. Shirt collars were unbuttoned and sweat poured down exhausted faces.

At five o'clock, when the detachment had covered the first lap of the climb, bringing it out on a small plateau strewn with boulders, Shvetsov ordered a rest, but prohibited smoking. The soldiers threw themselves down in the snow. Some of the exhausted horses lay down alongside of the men, while others remained standing knee-deep in snow, their heaving flanks pressed against the drifts.

Hudodod sat down on a round stone and looked anxiously up at a dark cloud moving in their direction. It descended on them like an inverted cup filled with dirty cotton. Shvetsov went over to Hudodod and put his hand on his shoulder as he nodded at the cloud.

"What do you think about it, friend?" he asked under his breath.

Hudodod understood what was worrying the commander and shook his head with a click of his tongue. Things looked bad in his opinion.

Half an hour later the Red Army men put on their coats and continued their climb. A cold wind came down from the mountains, blowing in gusts that kept growing stronger. It pelted their faces with hail that drew blood. The tortured men sat down in the snow, covering their eyes with their hands and throwing their coats over their heads. After every gust they got up and crawled on, pushing ahead their tired horses. Wind and snow dust caused their eyes to stream with tears which froze on their faces along with the blood from the ice-wounds, causing inexpressible pain.

Shvetsov realized that if the wind should increase, disaster was inevitable, and he began to wonder whether it would not be better to turn back before their strength was completely exhausted. But between rifts in the cloud bank, he caught glimpses of the summit, now less than a thousand feet away. Shvetsov glanced at his watch. It was half past eight. The sun had long since sunk behind the peaks and darkness was descending with unpleasant swiftness.

Shvetsov was afraid that even if they reached the summit, they might lose their way in the blizzard and darkness and freeze to death in this ice-trap. Once more he went to

Hudodod, and his eyes asked whether they should continue, or whether they should turn back. Hudodod, who had himself come to the end of his strength, kept looking at the solid cloud bank moving in their direction and listening to the wind as he made some sort of mental calculation. Then, with a glance at the Red Army men strung along the mountainside, he licked his cracked lips and waved his hand in a gesture which indicated they should continue. Shvetsov liked this determined young man and felt that he could be trusted.

The commander turned to his men and shouted, "Just a little bit longer, fellows! The clouds are breaking and soon the wind will die down!"

The men did not answer, but those who had been sitting on the snow got up, and once more began the slow climb.

And indeed, the closer they came to the summit, the quieter became the wind. The clouds thinned out so that in places the stars shone through, and Shvetsov was filled with gratitude to Hudodod for his foresight and courage.

An hour later the detachment reached the summit. Shvetsov shouted "hurrah!", but immediately fell up to his neck in snow.

The soldiers stretched out on the plateau and lay motionless until their breathing became normal. The cold finally forced them to get up.

Maximov had shown the foresight to include a large flask of alcohol in his equipment, which he now took out of his saddle bag and handed to each of the men in turn. Hudodod was the only one who refused a drink, though he was as frozen as the others.

Once more the detachment moved forward in order to get out of the region of eternal snow as soon as possible and find a level place among the rocks lower down where they could spend the night.

4

Aziz-khon had no intention of risking his person by going deep into the canyon. After passing the first two cliffs, he pitched camp at a place where the trail opened out and there waited with his suite to receive word of the taking of the caravan.

Aziz-khon's cheek pained him unbearably. He removed the bandage and reclined on a felt mat in order to keep bathing the wound with cold water. No one dared speak to him, but sat silently watching the foaming river and waiting impatiently for the return of the runners whom Aziz-khon had sent to the ressaldar.

The first runner brought the news of imminent victory, of the prisoners and the Russian doctor—"big and fat and crying like a baby." Aziz-khon sent the runner back for the doctor.

Mirso-Hur sat down next to the khalifa and whispered that at last he was sure all his expenses would be recompensed. The khalifa, who had as yet told no one of the hopes he placed on this caravan, listened in silence. Nauruz-bek watched them out of the corner of his eye as he mentally calculated his own services and figured how he could keep those two from doing him out of his deserts.

Evening was approaching. The long rays of the sun slowly receded up the opposite mountainside. As they glanced down the trail, everyone expected the caravan to appear from behind the cliff any moment. A few basmachi whom Aziz-khon had ordered to remain with him kept climbing up the steep slope in order to catch the first glimpse of the approaching caravan. Finally the last rays of the sun slid off the mountain peaks and the shadows deepened above the river. Aziz-khon was annoyed by his long wait. He kept telling his agate beads and changing the compress on his cheek.

"They are coming!" shouted one of the basmachi suddenly, as he slid down from his vantage point in a cloud of dust.

Everyone was roused, but only one horseman armed with rifle and scimitar came galloping down the trail. He rode up to Aziz-khon and jumped out of the saddle.

"Where is the caravan?" asked Aziz-khon sharply. "Where are the prisoners?"

"Our soldiers have blocked the path so that the prisoners cannot possibly get through, oh worthy one."

"Why has the caravan not yet come? What is the ressaldar doing?"

"The Russian who remained alone in the cave is shooting," answered the runner as he withdrew a step.

"What do you mean? Have they not yet taken the caravan?"

"They have not yet taken it, respected one. The Russian who—"

"The Russian! The Russian!" shouted Aziz-khon. "Are a hundred soldiers with sixty rifles unable to take one Russian prisoner? Why do you lie, you dog? Return immediately and tell the ressalدار to take that Russian alive and bring him here. Bring the prisoners also."

The runner jumped into his saddle and galloped back, turning so sharply that he nearly fell over the precipice.

Darkness descended. All were silent. In his pain, Aziz-khon lay down with his arm under his head. The stars twinkled above the canyon and the jagged peaks drew so close that the heaven seemed a winding river of stars.

At last a second rider came dashing up. With a flash of his sabre he cried, "Praised be the Protector! The caravan is taken! It is on its way and will soon be here!"

Aziz-khon showed no pleasure.

"Where are the prisoners? Where is that Russian? Why do you not dismount?"

The disconcerted runner slid off his horse.

"They too are coming, your grace. But the Russian—he threw himself into the river and drowned."

"So you were unable to take him, eh? You sons of dogs!" swore Aziz-khon. "Sit down!"

The runner moved over to the basmachi guarding the horses and whispered something to them.

Darkness settled down completely. Still the caravan did not arrive. With the help of Zogar, Aziz-khon bandaged his cheek, and in some anxiety ordered the grooms to tighten the saddle girths.

A beating of hoofs was heard and a third horseman dashed up to Aziz-khon.

"Well? Where is the caravan?"

"Calm your wrath, oh blessed one! I am but an insignificant creature. They have reached the spot where the trail widens out. They want to turn back and go to Yakhbar. The caravan has come to a halt. Our soldiers say, why should they go to Siatang? What else can they hope to get there? The loot can be divided just as well at home."

"What do you mean, divide it at home?" cried Mirso-Hur, jumping up from where he had been sitting. "What can this mean, respected Khan?"

"Silence!" snarled Aziz-khon, as his whip whistled through the air. "It is not you I am talking to! Well, you wart of the ressalidar, continue what you have to say!"

"A few of the soldiers have unloaded the horses and threaten to shoot. They do not let the others come here either. The ressalidar is arguing with them."

"So that is the situation!" cried Aziz-khon, choking with rage. "Race back without sparing your horse. This is my word to the ressalidar: anyone who wishes to turn back is to be shot and thrown into the river! If the ressalidar fails to do this I shall come myself. Have you got that in your ears?"

"I have heard. I shall tell him, worthy one."

"Where are the prisoners?"

The runner was silent, and the darkness prevented Aziz-khon from seeing his face.

"Do not be angry," said the runner at last in a hushed voice. "I am merely a runner. No guilt lies on my shoulders. They have killed the prisoners. They got in everyone's way."

"And the doctor?" Aziz-khon placed his hand on the Mauser stuck into his girdle.

"The doctor too. Everyone was sick of his constant whining. First they gave him a sabre cut across the shoulders, then they broke his arms and stabbed him in the chest—he was as soft as a fat boar, and he roared like one. They threw his body into the river."

"Ah-h-h!" said Aziz-khon hoarsely. "This too you must tell the ressalidar: all those who had a hand in killing the doctor are to be bound and brought here! The doctor was for me, do you understand, you dog? For me!" The voice of Aziz-khon had suddenly become sharp and thin. "He was to have healed my wound! Be off with you!" And he lashed out at the runner's legs.

The latter struck his horse and disappeared into the darkness, thankful to have escaped with his life. Mirso-Hur wanted to voice his complaint, but was intimidated by the Khan's fury. Aziz-khon went off down the path and took a seat on a rock, from where he watched the slow illumination

of the canyon as the moon rose above the mountain peaks. Far below foamed the deep waters of the river with a gleam of green gold.

When the moonlight reached the trail, revealing the people seated in silence there, still another rider rounded the cliff. He walked his horse to the Khan, dismounted, and bowed with his fingers touching his turban. Aziz-khon had taken himself in hand by this time and glanced questioningly into the man's beardless face in the moonlight.

"What is happening out there?"

"Spare your wrath, blessed one! The ressalدار has shot three of his soldiers. The caravan is on the way. Soon it will be here."

"What about those who killed the doctor?"

"They were the very ones who shouted 'Return home!': Haydar-bek and Rakhim-dzhan whom the ressalدار has shot along with a third who had no hand in the killing."

Aziz-khon spat into the face of the runner, turned abruptly and went back to his mat. The horseman wiped his face on his sleeve, mounted, and gave his steed such a blow between the ears with the flat of his sword that the animal first fell on its knees, then rose on its hind legs and finally set off at breakneck speed down the trail.

At last the patter of many hoofs came from beyond the cliff and a long line of horsemen appeared in the moonlight. The packhorses of the caravan were distributed between the riders.

Aziz-khon did not wait for the ressalدار, but heavily mounted the horse brought to him and rode off to the village without a single backward glance. He was followed by his entire suite. The ressalдар did not attempt to overtake him, continuing to ride at the head of his subdued warriors.

Behind the caravan came packhorses bearing the bodies of the basmachi whom Sho-Pir had shot. The procession was brought up by a few old men armed with flintlocks.

The ressalдар had wanted to send the bodies back to Yakhbar, but he could not find anyone willing to take them, for each of the basmachi was intent on getting his share of the caravan loot.

The silence and order which the basmachi preserved along the trail was forced and unnatural: they proceeded along the narrow path like water compressed within a narrow pipe. But as soon as they reached the wastelands beyond the last cliff, they scattered over the stony ground with shouts and cries, driving the caravan horses in front of them. The packs fell off and the horses became entangled in the dangling ropes, leaping and struggling in their efforts to become free. The basmachi only drove them the harder, rejoicing whenever a pack fell loose, for then they would rise in their stirrups and lean down to grab whatever came to hand, dashing off to hide their loot at the foot of the cliffs or among the piles of boulders or along the riverbank, after which they would race back for more.

In vain did the fuming ressalidar race back and forth across the wastelands trying to stop the plunder. In vain did he shout hoarse threats to shoot anyone who dared steal and hide away goods. The basmachi paid no attention to him, and when he drew his revolver on one of them, all the others surrounded him and menaced him with swords and rifles.

When Aziz-khon, who had almost reached the fortress, heard the wild cries, he turned and with his entire suite rushed to the aid of the ressalidar.

"Death and damnation to all of you!" he yelled in fury. "Stop! Your reward will not run away from you! Have I ever said you were unworthy of reward?"

"We have no need of your reward!" came a brazen voice. "We ourselves shall take what is due us! All this has been taken by our hands. We need nothing else! We want to go home! What has the ressalidar done? He has killed three brave men! And why? Because he is a dog!"

"Who is speaking?" asked Aziz-khon with great restraint. "Let him who speaks step forward if he is not a coward. Why does he not come? Look about you, everyone. Is he not there? A trusty man can hardly be afraid to repeat his words in the presence of his Khan. Yes, the ressalidar has shot three traitors. But we had intended to torture the prisoners in order to find out what we wanted to know. Those who prevented

our doing this were traitors. The ressalдар acted correctly. Leave the caravan now and enter the fortress so that I myself can distribute to each according to his merits. Have you forgotten about the Protector? Do you find it unnecessary to give the pir his due? Or do you think that the worthy merchant fed you for nothing in Yakhbar and can be cheated out of his portion? Or have you no faith in my promises? Enter the fortress, my trusty men! Enter the fortress, all those who hope to win my good graces, rather than to call down my wrath on their heads! Resselдар, select ten honest men and bring everything to the fortress. There we shall divide it according to the law."

Aziz-khon turned his horse sharply around and rode ahead. Behind him came his suite. The basmachі remained where they were, consulting among themselves in lowered voices. Finally they decided to submit to authority, and proceeded to the fortress in a group. The ressalдар remained behind with ten dependable old men to gather up the scattered packs and tie them on the horses.

Soon four huge bonfires were burning on the fortress grounds. The ressalдар and Nauruz-bek drove the canyon-men out of their houses to gather brush for the fires. All the fuel remaining in the village after the winter was brought from the homes of the faqirs and piled in the courtyard of the fortress. One by one the horses of the caravan were led in and their packs dumped in an enormous heap in the centre of the yard. Crates and sacks of food products, provisions, bales of cloth, broken crockery, pails and teakettles, shovels and pickaxes, canned goods, medicines—everything imaginable was piled in complete disorder and illuminated by the flames of the bonfires. The basmachі sat inside the square formed by the fires and gazed greedily at the rich plunder. On rugs in front of the stolen goods sat Aziz-khon, the merchant, Nauruz-bek, Zogar, the sayids and mirs and other important personages.

Bobo-Kalon came out of his tent and took his place, silent and thoughtful, beside Aziz-khon. Kendiry watched the proceedings from a rock at some distance.

A small fire was built behind Aziz-khon for the purpose of illuminating each article to be distributed.

The canyon-men who brought the brushwood cringed

against the wall of the fortress and looked longingly at the wealth which would have been theirs had not the village been raided by the basmachi. Conscious of their accusing, hostile glances, Nauruz-bek shouted to the guards to drive the canyon-men out of the fortress.

The old men whom Aziz-khon allowed to approach the plunder hauled out the packs, felt the contents of the sacks, and broke open the crates which still remained whole. Mirso-Hur and Nauruz-bek hastily dragged the most valuable things off to one side.

The work was carried on in complete silence, and it took so much time that Aziz-khon dozed off. But in spite of their exhaustion the basmachi kept their inflamed eyes glued to the goods revealed in the flickering light of the fires.

The supply of firewood came to an end when the moon was already slipping down toward the mountain peaks. Aziz-khon woke up and ordered the ressalдар to get more fuel, for he realized that if they remained in darkness the soldiers might try again to make off with stolen goods. The ressalдар and ten of his men rode into the village, but soon returned empty-handed with the announcement that it would be necessary to chop down the mulberry trees in the orchards.

"Why not use that wood?" said Nauruz-bek, pointing to the gutters of the Khan's canal. "It is foolish to go so far for wood when we have a supply close at hand. Take those boards!"

The ressalдар glanced at the gutters extending along the rocky cliff. It would be the simplest thing in the world to break them up, whereas chopping down the trees and hauling them from the village would be a difficult task. The ressalдар could of course order the canyon-men to do it, but by this time he was too tired to exert himself by shouting orders and threats. What would the Khan say about the canal?

"Break it up," said Aziz-khon curtly.

A few of the basmachi sauntered over to the face of the cliff, but at this moment Bobo-Kalon rose with a frown and said in slow, hostile tones:

"My grandfather built that canal. I shall not allow you to destroy it."

Aziz-khon turned around. His face ached painfully. Every word was agony for him.

"Break it up," he repeated.

Bobo-Kalon bit his lip and left the circle of those seated in the courtyard. He would have disappeared around the tower had he not been startled by coming up against the dreadful body of Mariam hanging there in the darkness. He turned away and circled the tower from the other side. Like hammer blows upon his brain came the sound of the breaking up of the gutters.

The first gutter came crashing down into the courtyard, splintering along its entire length, and the basmachi dragged it over to the dying fires. Bobo-Kalon's heart beat slowly and dully. In his anger and offense he felt that his entire life was being destroyed along with the canal. Indeed, was not that the canal of his fathers which had clung to the rocky cliff ever since some distant time in the past? In destroying this canal Aziz-khon was dealing a blow to Bobo-Kalon himself and to his ancestors who once had likewise been subjugated by the Yakhbarians. This canal was dearer to Bobo-Kalon than the lives and blood of human beings.

In helpless hate the old man sank down upon a stone and covered his ears with his hands, staring unblinkingly at the long black boards of the gutters sticking up like charred bodies out of the revived bonfires. Against the background of the flames swarmed the basmachi: the distribution of spoils had begun.

It seemed to Bobo-Kalon that he was having a dreadful and incomprehensible dream. Tongues of red flame leaped and twisted. Clouds of black smoke curled above a swarm of devs who shrieked and pushed each other in the flickering light of the flames in their effort to reach the pile of riches accumulated through the ages. Bobo-Kalon no longer saw Aziz-khon or Nauruz-bek or Mirso-Hur. He saw only a mass of upraised, grasping, clutching hands. He heard only an insistent hum in which he could not distinguish separate orders and commands, cries of anger, joy, and indignation. Along the wall of the fortress he caught glimpses of figures bent under staggering loads. They disappeared in the darkness beyond the fortress wall, and then he could sometimes hear sharp cries coming from far down the river, or perhaps from the moon-drenched village.

Suddenly everything stopped and became silent, and in the light of the fires Bobo-Kalon saw the khalifa and the merchant Mirso-Hur standing facing each other in fierce argument. "It belongs to God!" cried the khalifa. "It belongs to me!" shouted Mirso-Hur. Their words came rushing so fast that it was impossible to make out what they were saying. Somebody laughed out loud while somebody else tried to conciliate them.

Perhaps Bobo-Kalon was simply exhausted by the noise and excitement and by his two sleepless nights. He was used to peace and solitude. There were moments when it seemed to him that he had already died and that all this was taking place above the world which he had already left.

The brain of the old man was touched. He sat there in the moonlight, far removed from everyone, looking into the darkness cleft by the fires without realizing what was taking place, without participating, unable to overcome his strange feeling.

But suddenly he became aware of wild cries coming from a distance. They did not resemble the cries he had been listening to, but thrust themselves into the monotonous hum until they pierced his consciousness. The old man became alert. The new sound was the shrieking of women. It came from down in the village and expressed utter despair. What could be happening down there?

Bobo-Kalon got up and slowly approached the fortress wall, climbing up the ruins as though they were a flight of steps. As he reached the top of the wall he saw several stacks of clover flaming on the flat housetops down in the village. The shrieks came from various directions, but no people were to be seen in the moonlight. Yet Bobo-Kalon understood everything: the soldiers of Aziz-khon—undoubtedly those who had already received their share of the loot—were after the women of Siatang. Suddenly a horseman appeared along the dark path leading from the village to the fortress. He made his way over the rocks and through the opening where the gates to the fortress had once been. Now he was passing just below Bobo-Kalon, who recognized in him one of the aides of the ressalidar. With a flick of his whip he directed his horse to the crowd surrounding Aziz-khon, but he stopped before reaching him and shouted:

"Hear me, oh worthy one! Six of our warriors have taken wives from the village and left for Yakhbar. They would listen to no one!"

The crowd of basmachi became silent. Aziz-khon half turned to the newcomer and looked at him without speaking.

"It is to you I am speaking, worthy one! It is to you that I say: six of our warriors. . . ."

"You say! You say!" fumed Aziz-khon unexpectedly as he jumped up and turned to the ressaldar. **"Do you hear? Why are you sitting here instead of keeping an eye on your soldiers? Would you like me to be left here all alone? Get on your horse and take up your post at the entrance to the canyon so that you can shoot down anyone who does not obey us! Is it not traitorous to abandon one's Khan? Be off at top speed!"**

Sullenly and preemptorily the ressaldar called out the names of dependable men who were to go with him. They reluctantly untied their horses and mounted. One of them brought the ressaldar his horse. Then, with rifles swung over their shoulders and swords unsheathed, the band galloped away down the path to the village. Once more the division of spoils began in the fortress yard, while from the village came the intermittent shrieks of the women and the dry clover stored from the past summer kept burning on the roofs.

Bobo-Kalon climbed down off the wall with his hand pressed to his heart as though to calm its beating. On the path he had caught sight of two canyon-men, breathless from running. He had no wish to be seen, but they were already inside the fortress and made directly for him, prostrating themselves at his feet. They were Issof and Ali-Mamat, true followers of the Preordained. The gasping, trembling, dishevelled Ali-Mamat snatched the turban off his head and threw it at Bobo-Kalon's feet in a sign of utter abasement.

"We are accursed, oh worthy one!" gasped Ali-Mamat. **"They are wolves rather than soldiers of the truth! Am I unfaithful if I see that they rob us and burn our homes? Two of the wolves have seized my daughter, Nafiz.... Ah, I am accursed indeed! They have taken away my wife, Shirin-Mo—better to have the ravens peck out my eyes than to have witnessed**

such a sight! Nor can you quietly behold such outrages, Bobo-Kalon, now our Khan! Order them to stop their devastation. Let the true believers overtake those two wolves. Are there no true believers?"

"Let us go," said Bobo-Kalon shortly, touching Ali-Mamat lightly on the shoulder. "Rise and let us go." He himself straightened up and directed his steps toward Aziz-khon. Issof and Ali-Mamat followed him, glancing timidly at the basmachi who made way for them.

"Tell him what you have to say," said Bobo-Kalon as he led Ali-Mamat to Aziz-khon.

Ali-Mamat and Issof threw themselves on the ground in front of Aziz-khon and began to plead humbly for his aid, but Aziz-khon did not deign to listen.

"Be off!" he cried. "What business is it of mine? You have your own Khan."

"These are true believers, Aziz-khon," said Bobo-Kalon. "Ali-Mamat is not a faqir, but the nephew of mir Temor."

"Remove their dust from my eyes," cried the enraged Aziz-khon, making a sign to the basmachi.

A hoarse laugh rang out. The basmachi grabbed Ali-Mamat by the legs and dragged him away while others kicked Issof to his feet.

"I am the Khan! What are you doing, mad one?" cried Bobo-Kalon, rushing at Aziz-khon with clenched fists.

"You may be Khan for the faqirs," sneered Aziz-khon without moving, "but not for us. They will not carry your women off to Yakhbar. I have already given orders to the res-saldar. But no harm will come of having the soldiers of truth get their pleasure from them this night. Will they work any the worse for it tomorrow? Or do you think that inferior children are born of the Yakhbarians? Or perhaps you assume that those who are grovelling at my feet are worthy creatures? There are no worthy ones here excepting those whom I have brought with me! All are contemptible who remained to live on ground contaminated by the faithless!"

The stunned Bobo-Kalon saw the contempt in the face of Aziz-khon and the grins on the faces of the basmachi who surrounded him with glinting weapons. He was seared by insult, as by strong acid. The sayids and mirs sitting off to one side hung their heads sullenly without glancing at him.

Slowly he turned his gaze to the bonfires where the last boards of his canal were burning; to the tower which had been transformed from his residence into a gallows and a gaol; to the piles of torn and broken plunder scattered in the courtyard; to the walls of the fortress and the opening through which could be seen the flames of dying fires down in the moonlit village. . . . He crossed his arms on his chest beneath his white beard in a gesture of prayer.

"Hear what I would say, you who have come here," he pronounced in clear syllables. "Hear what I would say Aziz-khon, who has made friendly overtures to us. And you sayids and mirs who have returned to your native soil to, glorify the law of the Preordained, for so long violated by the faithless. Not at my bidding did you come, Aziz-khon. Of your own free will did you come. It was you who said, 'Become the Khan. I shall come and destroy the faithless, and when I have glorified the light of truth I shall leave.' I had faith in you, Aziz-khon, though my ancestors had no faith in your ancestors who came to conquer our land. I thought that times had changed and that the Protector had forgotten old quarrels between the faithful. I gave my silent consent when you held your trial, Aziz-khon, thinking that once more the Preordained would reign supreme. But you have come, and a groan has risen from Siatang as though the very cliffs had collapsed on our hearts. You have mixed all of us together—the faithful and the faithless—like a wolf unable to distinguish the black sheep from the white. You were interested only in acquiring the riches brought here for the faithless. You wanted your woman. Because of your low passions, you violated the Preordained by allowing that woman to live. She is still alive, lying in that tower! I know that your glance is full of evil and malice now, but I do not look into your face. I am looking up at the mountains on which I have looked throughout the five cycles of my life. Now I look at them for the last time. I cannot tell you to leave. You are possessed of arms and will not leave. But my hour has come and I am no longer the Khan. If you kill me, that is the will of the Protector. If you do not kill me I shall go away. I shall go into those mountains. Not one step shall I take in descent. Every step shall be upward, until I rise to the very heavens. If a mountain panther meet me in the snows,

I shall bless it as the emissary of the Protector. I shall go and never come back, and may my curses be on your head, Aziz-khon!"

Bobo-Kalon became silent.

"He must be possessed," whispered one of the basmachi. "Do not touch him. Let him go away."

"Yes. Let him go away. Let him perish in the snows," said Aziz-khon, putting aside the Mauser with which his trembling fingers had been playing. "We hold him in contempt and pay no heed to his words."

Slowly Bobo-Kalon took off the robe which had been presented to him by Aziz-khon and which he had worn over his old white Siatang robe. Rolling it into a ball, he threw it into the fire. With a glitter of gold and silver, it unfolded in the air with the sleeves fluttering like wings. It fell into the fire with a shower of sparks, flared up and was quickly consumed.

Once more Bobo-Kalon stood erect, with his hands crossed on his breast; slowly he made his way through the crowd of basmachi who stood aside to let him pass. Hated by the canyon-men, condemned by the basmachi, he proceeded without a backward glance to the trail leading to the Upper Pasture, along which he gradually withdrew until his white robe merged with the shadows in the moonlight.

Aziz-khon spat on the ground and turned to Nauruz-bek who had been in charge of the division of the spoils.

"Continue!" he said.

6

Kendiry spent a sleepless night watching what was going on. He watched and listened as he sat under the awning of his barber shop or wandered about the fortress courtyard. He was infinitely bored. He was also displeased with Aziz-khon's behaviour, but he realized that there was nothing he could do about it. Aziz-khon had of course gone too far. During the last few days Kendiry had understood him better than ever before. Nothing had come of the friendship between Aziz-khon and the people of Siatang on which Kendiry had so counted. Aziz-khon's lack of understanding of Kendiry's policy and his ability to measure his own power only in terms of the number of crimes with which he intimidated

the canyon-men, had led him to violate the conditions of their conspiracy, so carefully thought out by Kendiry and mutually agreed upon that winter in Yakhbar.

Not in this way had events been planned to develop. With the support of the Yakhbarian Khan the former aristocracy of Siatang headed by Bobo-Kalon were to have brought the people of Siatang to a state of submission. Tied as they were to the Yakhbarians by bonds of religious fanaticism, they were to have roused the entire settlement against Soviet power at the very moment when the Russian Red Army men would appear at the mouth of the Siatang River. Under such conditions Aziz-khon and his band could have remained here for as long as necessary. It would have taken much time and strength for the Russians to put down the resistance of the inhabitants of Siatang and restore Soviet power. Thus the mission of Kendiry would have been excellently carried out.

But matters had turned out differently. Even the Siatang sayids and mirs could hardly be expected to want Aziz-khon to remain in Siatang now. The incident with Bobo-Kalon had wrecked half of Kendiry's plans. There could no longer be any question of Aziz-khon's receiving the support of the inhabitants. Naturally the first detachment of Red Army men (scheduled to put in its appearance within the next two days) would be wiped out by the soldiers of Aziz-khon, but it was clear that these soldiers were interested only in rushing home with their loot. Aziz-khon himself was anxious to get away from here, and that did not fit in with Kendiry's plans at all. If only the Khan did not decide to leave immediately! All that had been accomplished so far would turn out to be to no purpose if the detachment of Red Army men arrived to find only the traces left by the basmachi. In such a case the incident could not possibly serve as the cause of breaking off friendly negotiations between the two countries. "This will raise too little noise," thought Kendiry in vexation. "At any cost Aziz-khon must be made to remain here for at least two or three days."

These were Kendiry's thoughts as he walked up and down the courtyard. He was sick and tired of the shouting and squabbling accompanying the distribution of spoils. He had long since been ready for a good sleep, but he forced himself to

remain awake in order to be aware of all that was taking place. As he listened to the constant bickering of Mirso-Hur and the khalifa, he realized that as soon as the distribution of trifles to the soldiers was finished and the time came to divide the valuable goods, the bickering would turn into a serious quarrel.

Kendiry also realized that soon Aziz-khon would remember that Nisso was imprisoned in the tower. But when at last all the soldiers had received their due and the pale, exhausted merchant and khalifa agreed to take a rest before dividing up their spoils, Aziz-khon rose with an effort and made for his tent with his hand pressed to his aching cheek.

By dawn peace and quiet had settled over the fortress. The fires had died down. The entire yard was filled with sleeping soldiers. The sayids and mirs lay on rugs and were covered with quilts. Quiet also reigned in the village, where the shrieks of the women could no longer be heard.

With drooping heads the horses dozed where they were tethered. The sheep and the cows lay huddled in the fold beyond the mill. A huge dark vulture sat on top of the tower greedily watching Mariam's body and awaiting its hour.

The only creatures not asleep were a few old men armed with rifles who guarded the mill where the grain was stored, the piles of yet undivided spoils lying in the courtyard and the door of the tower where Nisso was imprisoned. They were as cocky and patient as the vulture waiting up on the tower.

Kendiry went to the fortress gates and looked into the distance to make sure that the horsemen of the ressalدار were still guarding the entrance to the canyon. Seeing them at their posts, he decided that at last he could go to sleep since nothing could be expected to happen until at least noon. He picked up one of the quilts lying on the ground and retired to his barber shop, where he lay down with his elbow for a pillow.

But his thoughts would not leave him. It would take the Red Army detachment at least two more days to get here, while Bkhara would be sure to give him a day's notice by building a fire on a distant peak. By the following night

it would be necessary to inform Aziz-khon that the Red Army men were coming, presenting the news as something utterly unexpected. Then the plans for defending the Siatang canyon. . . .

As he fell asleep Kendiry began to wonder how Aziz-khon would receive the news. Perhaps he would turn coward. For some reason he had been letting the *ressaldar* take the initiative in everything.

Kendiry slept for less than an hour, during which time he dreamed that he was sitting at a round table in a large private office whose walls were lined with massive, glass-encased bookshelves, while the bright light streaming from the ceiling was prised through a crystal chandelier. About the table sat seven professors whose stern, clean-shaven, expectant faces Kendiry swept with a glance as he hid the embarrassment he himself felt in their presence. Six years of training would prove to have been in vain if he should reveal his embarrassment. Six years earlier he could have smiled impulsively, allowed his eyes to express any emotion, neglected to control the muscles of his face. Now his expressionless face was a mask which was estimated as his greatest asset. But still he was embarrassed at the present moment. He was spending too much time considering his answer to the last question put to him. Would he fail this test? He was annoyed with himself for becoming upset—people like him should not allow themselves to become upset by anything. He felt that his entire fate would be decided within the next two or three minutes. He concentrated all his efforts on trying to recall what he had been taught. Was it possible that he would be unable to answer that accursed question?

"I would give them all a laxative," he answered at last, "and analyse the contents of their stomachs."

Quite right. The light nod of the professor sitting opposite assured him that his fate had been decided in his favour. His six years of labour had not been in vain! Everything had turned out all right! But a monkey was hanging over their heads. A monkey was clasping the chandelier with its shaggy paw and hanging there above their heads. He could not understand that. Why should they have found it necessary to further test him by unexpectedly bringing

in this monkey? The animal placed its paw on his shoulder and began to shake him. . . .

Kendiry opened his eyes. Bright sunlight was streaming into his face and someone was gently shaking him by the shoulder.

"Is that you, Bkhara?" said Kendiry without revealing the slightest surprise. "Why have you come?"

"Greetings to him who nourishes trees and plants, greetings to the sun, greetings to the moon, to the purest of the pure and to the universal!" said Bkhara quickly, and his toothless mouth was like a hole in his face. Tiny drops of sweat trickled down his dry and wrinkled cheeks. "I had no time to light a fire. I ran faster than any horse. The Russian Red Army men are approaching the mouth of the river!"

It was as though there had been no dream. Kendiry immediately sat up and looked at Bkhara who was squatting before him.

"Already? Have you seen them?"

"Last night I sat waiting in the mountains halfway to the mouth of the Zarkhok. Suddenly I saw some horsemen. Five of them. Had I waited for the others, those would surely have slipped past me. But how could I get ahead of them without being seen? I ran to the riverbank, blew up a goat skin and swam down the Great River. Then I came here. Now they have probably reached the mouth and may arrive here by nightfall. There are no soldiers along the trail. . . ."

"Anything else?"

"Nothing, excellency. Where shall I go?"

"Among the rocks where you can see without being seen. Go!"

Bkhara disappeared. "If he had not thought of swimming down the Great River he could hardly have reached here before them," thought Kendiry hugging his knees. "The machine is operating more quickly than I expected. A whole day sooner! Hm! I would certainly have miscalculated had I sent one of the Khan's cretins to keep watch instead of Bkhara! But I must begin acting immediately."

Aziz-khon was stunned when Kendiry woke him up and told him the news. He walked up and down beneath the

wall in the company of the barber, stroking his black beard with a trembling hand. He was so frightened that for a long time he did not even hear the words Kendiry spoke to calm him. Kendiry could see that Aziz-khon had no confidence in his soldiers, and even the assurance that there could be no more than twenty or twenty-five Red Army men did not rouse the fighting spirit of the stunned and panic-stricken Khan.

"Where have they come from? How did they find out? What shall we do?" he asked in bewilderment. He was torn by the most contradictory impulses: at one minute he wanted to wake up all his men and tell them the news; at the next he insisted on the strictest secrecy.

"Listen to me, my friend," said Kendiry at last with a feeling of repulsion. "It is necessary to immediately place every man armed with a rifle in ambush along the canyon, while another group must be stationed ahead of the ambuscade so that when the Red Army men pass they can block the trail and cut off their retreat. Everything is very simple. The Red Army men will be wiped out to the last man."

"Very well," said Aziz-khon after a moment's pause. "I shall send the ressalدار to arrange the ambush. You go along also to show them where and how. Give them your advice."

"What about you?"

Aziz-khon thought for some time before answering. As Kendiry studied the expression of his face, he caught swift stealthy glances cast in the direction of the path leading to the Zarkhok Pass.

"I shall remain here with Zogar," answered Aziz-khon. "Let everyone see that I am calm and undisturbed."

Kendiry realized the Khan's true intentions, as revealed by his glances. This, of course, was only to be expected from Aziz-khon. He wished to remain aloof from everything, so that in case of emergency he could abandon his men to save his own skin. He would take Nisso and Zogar and try to reach Yakhbar over the Zarkhok Pass.

"No, Aziz, that will never do. You and Zogar must also take part in the ambush. Your presence will inspire your men."

"I have said that I shall remain here!" replied the Khan, sullenly without looking at Kendiry who had had

the audacity to omit the respected "khon" from his name.

"Listen, Aziz, I can see that you have doubts as to the outcome. That is stupid. You have sixty rifles and nearly a hundred soldiers. They have no more than twenty or twenty-five. You know very well that one brave fighter well hidden in our mountains can kill a hundred men. What have you to fear? You must remember only one thing: whatever happens you must not give me away. I know how well you can hold your tongue when you wish to. Even if you should be taken prisoner, you yourself will be in no danger. My people will make arrangements to exchange you for some important person. We still need you. You will remain alive and return to Yakhbar. You have nothing to fear. But if you give me away, there will be no escape for you, either here or in Yakhbar. If you are taken prisoner, the Russians will kill you. If you remain free and return to Yakhbar, my people will find you and kill you."

"Very well said," muttered Aziz-khon, and it was difficult to determine whether he was being sarcastic or submissive. "Why speak of my giving you away. I know you and your people. But what about the others?"

"What others? The ressalidar? The khalifa? Tell them what I have told you."

"And the merchant? And Nauruz-bek?"

"Do not worry about them. Leave that to me. No one else knows anything about me. The most important thing now is for you to calm your fears, rouse your men and take up your positions in the canyon. I wish to remain here alone. Later I shall come and see how you have managed. I give my word for it that by nightfall not a single Red Army man will remain alive. Do you understand everything I have said, Aziz?"

Aziz-khon offered no further objections. One thing he understood very well: Kendiry would not allow him to abandon everything and run away. He tried to assume an expression of calm and confidence, and would have immediately roused his men.

"Wait, Aziz-khon," said Kendiry quickly, already considering his latest chess move: the immediate removal of Aziz-khon from the fortress under whatever pretext present-

ed itself. "Say nothing for the present. Mount your horse and ride to the ressalدار."

"Why?"

"Have him come here. The three of us must hold a conference."

"Cannot the Khan send a runner on such errands?" asked Aziz-khon indignantly.

"Do not be offended. You must go yourself. Everyone is asleep and let them go on sleeping. No one must wake up until we are ready. Is it beneath the dignity of the Khan to check up on how his subordinates are carrying out his orders? Mount your horse and go."

"I do not understand you."

"You will in due time. This is very important. Wait here. I myself shall bring you your horse."

Kendiry walked off. Aziz-khon remained where he was struggling with his injured pride, offense, indignation and fear. He understood only too well that all his power and authority meant nothing to that foreigner who kept ordering him about.

When Kendiry brought him his horse, Aziz-khon mounted and rode off. Kendiry realized that the Khan's mood might change at any moment, and he placed no confidence either in his promises or his submissiveness. Kendiry turned around and looked attentively at the two guards sitting at the door of the tower snoring over their rifles. Then he took in the entire courtyard: not a single soul was awake. Everyone was sleeping soundly after so much excitement and three sleepless nights.

Kendiry quickly went to the pile of rocks behind the tower. At the edge of the cliff over the river he made a sign with his hand. Bkhara immediately appeared, running toward him noiselessly.

"Remain here. Look and listen. If either of those two awakes, cut his throat. Make no sound." Kendiry handed Bkhara his large steel razor.

"So be it, excellency," muttered Bkhara obediently.

Kendiry stole past the guards to the door of the tower. Throwing off the rope which substituted for a latch, he quickly opened the door and slipped inside.

Nisso lay half conscious on the floor, bound hand and

foot. The sudden shaft of daylight caused her to open her eyes. She moaned without turning her head. Kendiry slid to her side and covered her mouth with his hand.

"It is I, Kendiry. Hush, Nisso. Everyone is sleeping. I want to hide you, to save you from Aziz-khon, do you understand?"

Nisso looked at Kendiry with wide, frightened eyes. She did not comprehend what he was saying. How long had she been lying there in darkness and solitude? Without knowing what was taking place outside the walls of her tower, she had kept staring into the blackness, seeing nothing but the dreadful, eyeless face of Mariam, feeling the rope about her own neck, constantly expecting that the door would open and they would come to torture and kill her. In the extremity of her fear she was one minute frozen with cold and the next burning with a fever which left her drenched with perspiration. At first she had struggled to free herself of the ropes cutting into her flesh, but she quickly became exhausted and fell back in a state of semiconsciousness, desiring only that the end should come as quickly as possible. Then once more she was seized by terror and struggled and rolled across the cold stone floor. Whenever a snake slid across her body she screamed until she became hoarse and lost her voice. At last she closed her eyes and fell into a coma.

All of a sudden she was flooded with this bright light which hurt her eyes. They had come for her!

"It is me—Kendiry." It took some time for the words to penetrate her consciousness. "I shall hide you so that no one can touch you, only you must be very, very quiet."

Kendiry picked her up in his arms and carried her out into the bright daylight, once more whispering, "Quiet, quiet!" A wild-looking creature seized her by the legs and together they carried her to the rocks, where they crouched to the earth. Kendiry glanced above the rocks and said:

"All is well. Everyone is sleeping. There are large pits in the ground for storing grain beyond the sheepfold. Take her there and hide her in one of them, covering it with stones. Do not be afraid of him, Nisso."

Kendiry crawled out from behind the rocks and stood up, calmly crossing to the tower. With a glance at the two guards whose heads hung on their chests, he closed the door and then proceeded unhurriedly to the spot by the fortress wall where Aziz-khon had left him. There he sat down on a bit of sacking.

Soon Aziz-khon and the ressalдар rode into the fortress. Kendiry got up to meet them and help Aziz-khon dismount.

"Has Aziz-khon told you what I asked him to?" said Kendiry to the ressalдар.

"Yes." The face of the ressalдар was grey from sleeplessness and exhaustion.

"What have you to say?"

"This is what I have to say: you should either be killed or canonized."

"It is possible to accomplish both at once," laughed Kendiry. "But I doubt that you or Aziz-khon would do such a thing, am I right?"

Neither of them replied.

"I deserve your thanks, ressalдар," continued Kendiry. "Had it not been for me, Aziz-khon would have taken Nisso and Zogar and escaped to the mountains, leaving you and all your men to your fate. I asked him not to do such a thing, did I not, my dear Khan?"

"He who laughs when he lives, weeps when he dies," commented Aziz-khon with suppressed fury. "What are we to discuss?"

"Do not be angry, worthy one," replied Kendiry. "I have changed my mind about the conference. Everything is clear. Go wake up your men."

Aziz-khon tossed the reins of his horse to the ressalдар and went abruptly to his tent. For some time everything was a turmoil of running about and shouting in response to the ressalдар's hoarse orders and threats. But when all the basmachis were at last mounted, Aziz-khon ordered Zogar to take two soldiers and go to the tower for Nisso. He had decided to take her with him to the ambushade. Zogar ran back with the news of Nisso's disappearance. For the first time Kendiry witnessed to what extremes Aziz-khon's fury might lead him. With foaming mouth he lashed one of the

old men guarding the tower. He lashed him in the face and spat at him and when he went hoarse from cursing, he stamped on the old man where he lay on the ground. The second guard took advantage of the moment to slip away, while the ressalдар's soldiers sat on their horses watching the spectacle in gloomy silence.

"Search for her!" shouted Aziz-khon at last. "Everyone must search! Move mountains! We shall not budge a step until I myself kill that whore!"

The ressalдар rose in his stirrups and swung his sabre.

"While we are searching for her the Reds will arrive! Let us be off!"

The ressalдар's horse galloped through the gate of the fortress. Having no desire to call down the wrath of Aziz-khon on their own heads, the basmachi dashed off after the ressalдар with whoops and whistles. The khalifa was the last to leave.

Aziz-khon paced the empty yard, completely at a loss. Kendiry brought him his horse. The barber's face was cold and indifferent.

White with rage, Aziz-khon suddenly seized Kendiry's shoulders and glared at him with bloodshot eyes as he whispered:

"You?"

Kendiry dropped the reins and calmly removed Aziz-khon's hands from his shoulders. Then he stepped back a pace and carelessly threw open his robe to reveal the new automatic stuck in his belt.

"There is no point in upsetting yourself," he said, placing his finger on the trigger. "When you have wiped out the Russians—all of them to the last man—you will have your Nisso. I hid her because she distracts you from fighting. Later you can do whatever you like with her. I give you my word that nothing will happen to her. Do not be so hotheaded. And do not try to find her, for you never will!"

"You are a devil!" hissed Aziz-khon.

"Let's not quarrel, Khan," laughed Kendiry good-naturedly, and there was a merry twinkle in his cold eyes. "I am your friend and shall remain your friend. Get into the saddle and be off!"

Aziz-khon bit his lip as he mounted, but immediately groaned from the pain in his jaw. He struck his horse such a blow that the creature reared and tore off in the wake of the receding basmachi.

Kendiry stood laughing silently as he watched him go.

On the rugs spread in front of the tent sat the sayids and mirs whispering together. Mirso-Hur kept walking around the piles of goods and examining them with a greedy eye. Nauruz-bek chewed his dry lips as he watched Kendiry. In front of the tower lay the bloody body of the guard whom Aziz-khon had beaten to death.

By this time the dark vulture had sunk its claws into Mariam's shoulders and buried its head in her breast.

On one of the mountain peaks stood Shvetsov observing the village through powerful field glasses. Every once in a while he handed the glasses to Hudodod, who lay on the ground beside him.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

I

IN THE BRIEF moments of consciousness which came to Sho-Pir he was seized by chills. The rays of the morning sun which entered the fissure where he was lying could not warm him. His wounded body was sensitive to the slightest unevenness of his stony bed.

At dawn the women hid behind the rocks some distance away to keep watch over the trail. They saw the basmachi race to the Great River one after the other, and then they saw soldiers dressed like Sho-Pir (apparently Russians) gallop after them, firing their guns.

For quite some time they heard shooting in the canyon, and then a few of the soldiers galloped back. After them came others who were driving along some dismounted basmachi with their hands bound behind them.

Saukh-Bogor climbed back to Sho-Pir and sat watching until he should look at her. When he half opened his eyes she joyfully whispered to him all that she had seen along the trail.

Sho-Pir understood only that Red Army men had appeared in the canyon. But how? From where? Karashir had long since left for the village, so now Sho-Pir had hopes of being rescued.

Once more he lost consciousness for several hours. It was thus he was found by Dr. Maximov, whom Karashir had led along the riverbank until they came to Sho-Pir's shelter guarded by the women.

Maximov was small and quick in his movements. Without a word he threw off his coat, bent over the injured man, felt his pulse and listened to his heart, then examined the

wound in his shoulder and his broken arm. He opened his medicine kit and neatly placed bandage, iodine, ammonia, and other essentials on a dry stone alongside of him.

Karashir sat nearby, tightly clasping the broken sword he had taken from the body of the bandit and following attentively every movement of the doctor. The women stood behind him. They had all been given hardtack, but they forgot their hunger as they eagerly asked Karashir the latest news. He answered that he had not been in the village, but he knew that Issof and Fish Bones were alive. He could not say anything about any of the others, and he advised the women to keep quiet so as not to interfere with the Russian doctor.

On hearing a cry above the roar of the river, Karashir grabbed up the rifle with which he had not parted for two days and went to see what was happening out on the trail.

He saw three Red Army men walking their horses in the direction of the village. In front of them marched a long line of basmachi tied together with a single rope. Karashir returned to Maximov, and when the latter cast him a questioning glance, Karashir raised his hand importantly as though to say: "Go on with your work; everything is all right."

Sho-Pir groaned the minute Maximov touched his broken bone. But the doctor carried his task through to the end without paying any attention to the protests of the injured man.

"Well, brother, are you still alive and kicking? That's all," he said at last. "You are sure to pull through now. Nothing for a husky like you to do but go on living a hundred years."

Sho-Pir moved his lips in the effort to say something, but his tongue would not obey him.

"Water! Give him some water!" said Maximov, handing the women an empty flask. Saukh-Bogor took it and ran to the river.

Sho-Pir greedily drank a few swallows and after licking his dry lips rested his eyes on the doctor's insignia.

"Wh-where did you come from?"

"Don't talk. Listen, but say nothing. I am from the

Volost, from Shevtsov's detachment. We came over the Zarkhok Pass. We met one of your chaps at the mouth of the Zarkhok River and he showed us the way."

"Clo-closed," said Sho-Pir with difficulty.

"The Pass is closed?" guessed Maximov. "Be quiet, I tell you. It's closed all right. A lot of snow up there now. But according to all the theories, if a mountain goat can get through, we can. 'Wading where it's drippy, crawling where it's slippery.' The basmachi hardly expected us from that direction. As soon as they left for the canyon we swooped down through the village and blocked the entrance. Five of our fellows sealed up the other end, down by the Great River. So there they were bottled up—the whole bunch of them. We made quick work of them all right. To be sure a few of them clambered up the wall of the cliff and some others threw themselves into the river. But I doubt that many of them survived. We are still rounding up the last of them. Hear the shots? Now, now, not a word. Lie quiet. We shall get you out onto the trail in a minute. It may not be very comfortable, but you have guts I see. Once on the trail, we can fix up a makeshift stretcher and off you go for a good rest in the village."

"A-ziz-khon?"

"Aziz-khon? Their chief?" Maximov glanced at Karashir who had become suddenly attentive at the sound of the Khan's name. "We took him alive thanks to this chap."

"Nisso . . . Baktior . . . Mariam . . . Gulriz . . .?" said Sho-Pir, making an effort to speak distinctly.

Maximov became angry.

"Once I told you to be quiet, be good enough to obey my orders. All of them are all right. No reason to worry about others when you yourself are half dead."

Sho-Pir closed his eyes. Once more he became unconscious.

For a long time Maximov worked over him, trying to bring him to. But at last he gave it up, and with the aid of the women and Karashir lifted him onto his coat. Once more Sho-Pir groaned and his head fell back unsupported. Karashir noticed the doctor glance about for something which might serve as a pillow, and without a moment's

hesitation the canyon-man took his broken sabre and hacked off a long strip from around the bottom of his robe, rolling it into a ball which he placed under Sho-Pir's head. Carefully they carried the wounded man step by step along the edge of the cliff above the river. A half hour later they lifted him onto a stretcher made of the doctor's coat and two poles and set out down the trail to Siatang.

When they came to the place where Aziz-khon and his suite had waited for the caravan on the previous night, Karashir pointed to a narrow embankment leading to the jagged summit of the cliff.

"This is where I caught him," he said.

"Caught whom?" asked Saukh-Bogor.

"Aziz-khon," replied Karashir proudly, pounding his chest with his fist. "Caught him all by myself, understand? I, Karashir, caught a Khan. There were three of them—the Khan, the khalifa and a boy. They saw that they were in a hole—Red soldiers behind, fighting up ahead, which meant Red soldiers there too. The Khan abandoned his men. Came here to escape. But there I was up on the mountain. Way up there, understand? Look up—I was sitting there behind that rock. Why was I sitting there? On my way to Siatang. Basmachi down on the trail. Thought I could get through up there. Climbed to places that would stop even a goat. Fighting began down here. Had to wait. Could see everything from up there: three Yakhbarians on horseback with the Red soldiers coming close behind along the trail. The soldiers could not see the Yakhbarians. On my word, Saukh-Bogor, I never guessed it was Aziz-khon himself. He abandoned his horse. So did the others. They shot their horses. The horses tumbled down into the river. Then the three began to climb up here. Oi, oi, what a scare! Swords and those little guns in their hands. Made right for me. I thought of running away. Then I remembered my gun. Not loaded to be sure, but I would not let myself remember it was not loaded. I guessed they were running away from the Red soldiers. I also guessed they could not tell my gun was empty. I kept sitting there. I was not afraid any more. The Red soldiers reached here—right where we are walking. I thought to myself: now everything is all right. There is help at hand. So I shouted, 'Ai-yo! Ai-yo!' Then the Red

soldiers caught sight of Aziz-khon. That was when I recognized Aziz-khon. I thought to myself: you, Karashir, are worth nothing. But maybe this once the lamb will gobble up the wolf. They began shooting: Aziz-khon, the khalifa and the boy began shooting down; the Red soldiers began shooting up. The bullets went whizzing past me. I thought to myself: never mind, bullets are wise, they know where to go. Aziz-khon was hot from his climb, so he began taking off his things—first one robe, then another, then his turban. If he had not caught sight of my gun he probably would have stripped himself naked. I stuck my gun right into his face. How could he tell it was not loaded? Throw down your little gun, I shouted. Throw down your sword, I shouted. And he threw them down. The khalifa followed suit. The boy did not want to throw his down. But Aziz-khon gave him a whack with his fist and he threw them down. There they stood like bare trees in the winter, understand, Saukh-Bogor? Then the Red soldiers climbed up and took them. They wanted to take me too. They thought I was one of the basmachi. Then Hudodod galloped up. Everybody laughed and their chief kissed me. Here is how he kissed me—look.”

And without stopping as he strode along the path, Karashir swung his rifle off his shoulder and lifted it on his palms for a tender kiss as he said, “Thank you, my good gun.”

Saukh-Bogor laughed.

“Are you sure you are not lying, Karashir?”

“May you and I both be damned if I speak a word of falsehood!” exclaimed Karashir angrily. “This Russian doctor knows all about it. And everyone else knows all about it. Am I not a lamb? And have I not gobbled up a whole wolf the size of Ashtar-i-Kalon?”

“Where is Aziz-khon now?”

“In the village. I do not know where. The Red soldiers have him in charge. Ai, the dog! What a scorpion I managed to catch! I am the one to be thanked! I am a great person now! Go away! I am sick of talking to you!”

With a push at the woman who dared to doubt his words, Karashir walked ahead importantly, apparently forgetting all his surroundings, including Sho-Pir, who was being

swung along on the stretcher up ahead. For the first time in his life Karashir sang a song, the words of which he made up as he went. At first he sang softly to himself, repeating the words: "The lamb gobbled up the wolf, gobbled up his teeth, gobbled up his claws." Then suddenly at the top of his lungs he struck such a high note that Maximov stopped in surprise and came back to him.

"What's the matter? Have you gone crazy?"

But the doctor could not restrain a smile as he looked at Karashir, so proud and yet so funny, with the bottom of his robe hacked off and his gun tucked under his arm.

The basmachi had no time to destroy Baktior's house. Shvetsov quartered his staff in the room which had been Nisso's, while the rest of the house was converted into a hospital. Nisso, after having been rescued from the grain-pit, was lying delirious with fever in a bed by the window.

The floor of Sho-Pir's room was strewn with quilts and straw on which lay several canyon-men and two Red Army men. Fish Bones had been placed near the door.

Shvetsov's detachment was still operating throughout the entire length of the canyon, from the village to the Great River. Hudodod and several other faqirs armed with rifles confiscated from the basmachi were searching the Siatang Valley for any of the enemy who might be in hiding among the rocks. In the course of their search they would roll dead bodies down into the river, collect the scattered goods from the caravan, and capture runaway horses.

Hudodod brought a bolt of ticking from the fortress so that Gulriz and Zuaida might make mattress-cases for the sick and wounded. The women sat on the floor next to Nisso as they worked, but Gulriz kept jumping up and running to the window in the hope that Baktior would appear on the trail. No one knew anything about his whereabouts. He had not returned to the village and the Red Army men who came back from the canyon along with the faquirs had not seen him. Gulriz was sure that he was alive and several times had begged to be allowed to go in search of him. But

Shvetsov permitted no one but the armed faqirs headed by Hudodod to leave the village until he was sure that none of the basmachi were lurking in the vicinity. Guards were placed at the entrance to the Zarkhok Pass and at the first cliff of the canyon trail.

It was now midday. Separate shots could sometimes be heard coming from the canyon or the mountainsides. From time to time groups of Red Army men with captives in tow could be seen crossing the wastelands in the direction of the fortress. Whenever they caught sight of the basmachi, the canyon-men greeted them with angry shouts and threatened them with sticks and stones, ready to tear them to pieces in their rage.

"Give me your hand, Naná," muttered Nisso. "Pull its beak out of my breast. He is ripping me apart, ripping out my very soul. It is so hot. And it hurts."

"Quiet, Nisso," said Gulriz, laying her hand on the girl's burning forehead. "Lie still and do not toss so. . . . Blessed Protector, what shall I ever do with her? . . . Quiet, no one will harm you any more."

"Sho-Pir, throw off the snake! . . . Ee-yo, Ali! It is on his neck! It will choke him to death! Sho-Pir, your neck is all black! . . . Leave him alone! Do not kill Sho-Pir!" With a groan Nisso threw herself back on her pillow. "They have killed him! They have killed him!" she cried. "Hold me tight, Mariam, I am afraid. . . ."

At the sound of Nisso's raving Gulriz covered her face in despair.

"Water. Give her a drink," advised a porkmarked Red Army man who had been shot in the leg. "Wet a rag and put it on her forehead."

Gulriz did not understand the soldier's words, so he pointed to a bowl of water near the head of Nisso's bed.

Gulriz offered Nisso a drink, but she refused it. Fish Bones lay moaning in the corner, her entire face and body covered with bruises. After administering first aid, Maximov had left for the canyon and had been gone for several hours.

"Where is Sho-Pir?" asked Nisso unexpectedly, raising herself on her pillow and looking straight into Gulriz'

eyes. The old woman rejoiced to see that the delirium had passed.

"Sho-Pir is all right and will be here presently."

"Do you know that they hanged Mariam, Naná?" asked Nisso. Once more Gulriz was gripped by despair.

"I know, Nisso. But they have caught all of them."

"Have they caught Aziz-khon?"

"Yes. He is locked up in the tower. Red soldiers are guarding him."

"In the tower? That is very good."

Nisso fell back on the pillow and lay quietly until once more the delirium set in.

"Call Baktior, Naná, and tell him to search for Sho-Pir," she said sharply.

"He has already gone. He has gone," answered the old woman, suppressing her sobs.

Suddenly there was a clattering of hoofs outside the window. Gulriz rushed to see who it was. "No, it is not he," she whispered, and returned to her sewing. Into the room came Hudodod, armed to the teeth.

"How are you, Naná?"

"Have you seen Baktior?"

"No, Naná, but do not worry. Karashir says he is hiding in the mountains. Many have already come out of the mountains. I have good news: Sho-Pir is alive."

Nisso sat up.

"Ee-yo! Ali! Where is he?"

"Karashir found him. He is wounded and Karashir and the doctor have gone to bring him here."

Nisso wept.

"Then my son must also be alive," said Gulriz with conviction.

"How did you find Nisso, Hudodod?" asked Zuaida, gathering up the mattress-case lying on her knees.

"Have you not told them, Nisso?"

"I do not remember, Hudodod," answered Nisso softly. "Everything was black."

Hudodod sat down on the floor with his rifle alongside of him and swung the strap of a basmach scimitar off his shoulder.

"When we descended from the Pass the commander and

his Red soldiers went to the left, crossing the wastelands to the canyon. Two Red soldiers and I went through the village to the fortress on the right. Many of our people—Nigmat, Issof, and even Ali-Mamat with a lot of others—came running out of their houses and shouted to us joyfully.”

“Wait a minute, Hudodod,” interrupted Nisso. “Tell us first about Sho-Pir. Is he badly injured?”

“I do not know, Nisso. Karashir said he would recover all right. He said that his arm was broken. He jumped into the river.”

“Is he suffering badly?”

“Of course he is suffering, Nisso, but everything will be all right. The commander sent the doctor after him. . . . So then our people came running with sticks and pickaxes, forks and shovels. We went directly to the fortress. As soon as we got there we saw a big fire. That was our grain burning. The sayids began running away. The merchant set another sack of grain on fire. Kendiry ran over to him and shot him from his little weapon. Then he turned it right into the face of Nauruz-bek. Nauruz-bek also fell down. Both of them were dead. Kendiry threw away his little gun and laughed and kissed me. ‘Here they are,’ he said. ‘Two of the dogs. I killed them. They set our grain on fire, but now look at them,’ he cried. ‘I have killed the wolves. Put out the fire,’ he cried. ‘I have saved Nisso also. She is alive, hidden in the grain pit. First put out the fire.’ Kendiry helped us put out the fire. Then Kendiry took us and showed us where the stones covered the grain pit, and you were in there, Nisso, alive. . . .”

“Kendiry is a good man,” said Nisso. “I cannot remember anything. Where is he now?”

“Home. He went to get some sleep. Said he was tired. I cannot understand how anyone could sleep now.”

“Tell me, Hudodod,” said Nisso in a pleading voice, “where is Mariam?”

Hudodod looked at Nisso in surprise, and then exchanged glances with Zuaida and Gulriz. Both of the women dropped their eyes.

“Do you not know, Nisso?” asked Hudodod cautiously.

“Ai! I know, I know!” shrieked Nisso. “Her body is

all black, her eyes gashed out, her soul transformed into a bird—a little bird! The big bird pushed its head into her breast and pecked out her soul!”

“Leave her, Hudodod,” said Gulriz softly. “Do not speak with her.”

“I shall go,” replied Hudodod sadly. Picking up his rifle and scimitar he got up and went to the door, from where he turned once more to glance at Nisso. Then with a sigh he went out.

Profound silence reigned in the room. Fish Bones was no longer moaning, and the Red Army man with the wounded leg was rolling himself a cigarette. The tobacco spilled on his chest, and he carefully gathered up the bits. Zuaida rose and brought him a lighted match. In her bed by the window Nisso lay with closed eyes.

Slow wreaths of tobacco smoke rose to the ceiling. The beating of hoofs faded away and for some time no shots had been heard. Time began to drag. The only sound was the rustle of the ticking from which Gulriz and Zuaida were making mattress-cases. Through the window came the rosy reflection of the sunset, lighting up the face of Zuaida, with its large eyes and numerous freckles.

Suddenly a noise came from outside. Gulriz went to the window and saw a tiny procession entering the orchard. It consisted of Karashir, the Russian doctor, and three Red Army men carrying a stretcher. Behind them came Issof and Saukh-Bogor with arms entwined.

“They are bringing Sho-Pir!” cried Gulriz wildly, and made for the door.

Nisso rushed after her as though thrust by some strong hand. When they reached the orchard and saw the deathly pallor of Sho-Pir’s face Nisso gave a scream.

“They have killed him! They have killed my Sho-Pir!” she cried.

“Hush, you!” said Karashir, catching her by the arm. “Stop shouting. He is alive, do you hear? Alive!”

They brought Sho-Pir into the room, carefully placed him on a straw mattress and covered him with two blankets. Nisso sank on her knees beside him with her forehead touching his feet and remained there as though in a trance.

Kurban-bek, who was the khalifa's groom and had therefore ridden directly behind Aziz-khon during the raid, gave the following evidence during the preliminary examination held by Hudodod in the presence of Shvetsov and Taran:

"I do not belong to the basmachi. The Protector knows I am merely a servant of the khalifa. Where he goes, I go. I clean his horse and feed his horse and water his horse. He has a swift white horse. His horse—"

Hudodod warned Kurban-bek to cut short his speech on the subject of the khalifa's horse and answer the questions put to him.

"Very well," he replied. "We crossed the Great River near the Siatang—you understand?"

"I understand," answered Hudodod. "Be briefer."

"Even briefer? We rode along with Aziz-khon up ahead, the khalifa up ahead, the merchant and Zogar up ahead and me behind. That is how it was. Ask them if that is not how it was. We kept riding on, me with a gun but not knowing how to shoot. Shooting is very bad business. I decided not to shoot when the others began because I did not want to be one of the basmachi."

"You are the very hoof of a donkey!" cried Hudodod in vexation. "Are you going to tell us what we want to know or not?"

"I shall tell you, worthy one! Indeed I shall!" he gulped. "We were riding through the canyon not far from the Great River. The trail was narrow—cliffs below us, cliffs above us, cliffs everywhere around. Suddenly we saw five men up ahead with shovels and crowbars in their hands. They were coming in our direction. We stopped. We crouched against the cliff because the trail was narrow. We did not know who they were. Aziz-khon looked hard at them. 'Bow down before me, faithful ones,' he said. They stood looking at him like wolves. In very truth they did not want to bow down to him. Aziz-khon stopped his horse. 'Bow down before me!' he repeated. 'Praised be the Protector, I am the Khan and have come to free your land of the faithless.' That is what he said. You can ask him yourself if that is not what

he said. They just kept standing there—three young ones and two old ones. One of the young ones said, 'Aziz-khon?' Then I spoke up. 'Can you not see for yourselves?' I said. 'There is only one God-appointed Khan in Yakhbar! Bow down before him!' The young one must have been a real fiend, for his face became all dark and he shouted, 'You are a dog and no Khan! You have come for the woman, but you will never get her! Death to you!' He had an iron crowbar in his hands, and he jumped up and swung it at Aziz-khon's face. Aziz-khon's horse rose on its hind legs in fright; the Khan would never have remained alive if his horse had not reared. The crowbar struck him lightly in the face, and Aziz-khon fell, but the khalifa caught him up. Then all of us—except me—I said 'we'—I meant the basmachi who were close by."

"Were you so far away?"

"I was also close by. Only I am not one of the basmachi. I was frightened: I saw the blood, I saw Aziz-khon fall and that young one seize him by the throat. He threw himself on all those people like a panther. He was brave indeed. He was a real fiend. I had never seen such a man before, and I was so frightened that things became dark before my eyes. When the darkness passed I saw that young one lying dead with a bullet in his head and the others bound with ropes. Aziz-khon was sitting alongside the trail while the khalifa bandaged his face. That is all. When Aziz-khon was ready, we continued on our way."

"No, that is not all. What did they do with the dead man and those who were bound?"

"They took the ones who were bound to Yakhbar—it was not far away.... Three men went with them."

"Did they beat them?"

"Just a little. They beat them just a little with whips. I did not beat them. The Protector is witness that I did not beat them."

"Where is the dead man?"

"That man is one of the faithless," said sayid Mursal—the Siatang sayid Mursal. 'He is a dog. I know him. Throw him into the river.'

"To whom did he say this?"

The man hesitated a bit before answering.

"Very well," he replied at last. "He said it to me. He also said, 'See that no bloodstains remain on the trail. Soon the caravan will pass through and there must be nothing here to arouse suspicion.'"

"Did you throw the body into the river?"

Once more Kurban-bek began casting anxiously about, hanging his head and nervously fingering his tubeteika.

"No. Again I shall speak the whole truth. Only the truth. I remained behind when everyone else rode away. Cliffs below me, cliffs above me, cliffs everywhere around. If I threw him over the cliffs he would land on the rocks and be seen by the caravan. If I carried him down I would have to carry him very far. I myself might slip and fall into the river. I looked about and found a place where the trail had been repaired by placing crushed stones on top of branches. There was a hollow place under the trail where a body could be hidden. It could not be seen from above or below. I hid the dead man there. I was afraid to be alone there on the trail. I wanted to get away as soon as possible. I put him there where not even a bird could find him. He must be lying there even now. I am telling you nothing but the truth. I cleaned away the blood except for a little bit—a very little bit. The caravan could scarcely have seen it."

"That is enough," said Hudodod. His young face was clouded and his lips trembled. He kept looking intensely into the man's face, waiting for him to raise his dull gaze. For a second their eyes met, and Hudodod was engulfed by a wave of hate and indignation. Shifting his whip from his left to his right hand, he struck the man over the head with all his force. The latter clutched his forehead, suppressing a cry. Shvetsov silently took the whip out of Hudodod's hand.

After the examination, Hudodod went to the room where the sick and wounded were lying.

"What did you find out?" asked Gulriz with racking hope.

"Come with us, Naná," said Hudodod, dropping his eyes.

"Are you keeping something from me? Tell me the truth."

"Maybe he is in Yakhbar, but maybe he is not," answered Hudodod, lacking the courage to state his conviction. "Let us go. We shall search for him."

"Hold your tongue," said Hudodod sharply to the prisoner as they mounted their horses. "I shall kill you if you say a word. Hold your tongue until we arrive at that place."

"I shall be silent, worthy one. Indeed I shall," answered the man crossing his arms on his breast and bowing humbly.

In half an hour Gulriz, Zuaida, Hudodod and three Red Army men headed by Taran were on their way to the Great River. With them rode the prisoner Kurban-bek with his arms bound behind him. Hudodod led an extra horse by the reins, the purpose of which he alone knew. In the saddlebag he had placed a length of woolen cord and some linen.

It was early in the morning. Everyone found it strange that once more the canyon should be as quiet and peaceful as usual, as though nothing untoward had happened during the last three days. The only reminders of the catastrophe were the tufts of felt, bits of rag and used cartridge cases strewn across the wastelands and the dark bloodstains to be seen here and there along the trail. After the first rain the trail would once more become clean and wild and solitary.

The group quickly covered the twenty kilometres to the Great River. Gulriz was oblivious of everything about her.

When they were within two kilometres of the Great River, the prisoner gave a sign indicating that they should stop. Hudodod untied his arms and crawled with him under the trail.

"Keep your eye on Gulriz," he whispered to Zuaida. "I am afraid the body we find will be that of—Baktior."

Zuaida gasped. Then she hurried over to Gulriz and helped her dismount, urging the old woman to sit down beside the trail. But Gulriz sensed impending disaster and remained standing with her eyes glued on Hudodod. She had already guessed the truth but lacked the courage to admit it. Such a thing was impossible. Anything could happen, but not that.

The body of Baktior lay on unmelted snow beneath the trail. It had long since become frozen, but Baktior's face remained almost unchanged, except for its grey-green pallor. Two dark wounds on the forehead and temple confirmed the man's words as to how he had been killed.

They brought Baktior onto the trail and laid him on the strip of linen Hudodod had brought. Gulriz slowly dropped to her knees and threw her arms about her son, staring fixedly and incredulously into his glazed eyes as though she herself had become frozen. Thus she remained for a long time, while the others withdrew, unable to watch the tragic scene.

Gulriz kept whispering softly—so softly that no one could catch her words. As she spoke to her son she brought her lips close to his, and her whispering became quicker and surcharged with feeling.

Taran ordered the Red Army men to lead the horses away.

"We shall ride down to the Great River, fellows, while. . . . Hm, we better have a look around there."

They bound Kurban-bek hand and foot and left him on the trail. Taran pointed to him as he passed Hudodod, as though to say, "Keep an eye on him." Then they mounted and walked their horses some distance before they broke into a trot.

Gradually the mother's whispering became intelligible. Words broke loose one after the other. In places her voice broke or faded away, sometimes resembling a gentle cooing, sometimes becoming loud and piercing, rising to a scream.

"My little Baktior. . . . Sleep, sleep my little bird. . . . Are you cold, Baktior? Here, can you feel? I am pressing you to my breast to give you warmth. . . . Can you remember how I rocked you in my arms and fed you with my milk? You had strong little lips. Bold, tender little lips like those of a lamb. . . . Now you are grown-up, Baktior, and I can no longer lift you in my arms. . . . I can lift only your shoulders, like this, like this. Here, put them on my knees. Is your head tired, son? Here, let me hold it in my hands. Are you comfortable? Are you content? Are you warm? . . . Now you are big—yes, very big. . . . Could

I ever imagine you would some day be so big? Rest quiet, blood of my blood, flesh of my flesh, soul of my soul. Dream of the grass, of the green grass which grows so quickly. You are a panther, Baktior. You have great power, Baktior. Do you hear the roar of the river? It is your river. . . . Your mountains on every hand. You have power over the river, power over the mountains, power over all of Siatang. . . . Wake up now and look. . . . Do you see all this about you? It all belongs to you. You have great power. How many people there are in Siatang, and yet you have power over all of them! And I am your mother. All the canyon-men are my sons, but you are the eldest of them. When you speak, all of them listen. . . . Wake up, Baktior! Have you not slept enough? Wake up and look at me with your black eyes, your bright eyes, your gentle eyes. . . . Why do you not wake up? Do not frighten me, Baktior, look at me. . . . Why are you silent? Why do you not look at me? Why do you not breathe? Ai! Ai! I am afraid! He is not breathing!"

Suddenly Gulriz drew back and sat staring crazily at Baktior. Clutching herself by the hair, she pulled out two grey locks and shook them in front of her.

"Oh, Protector! What has happened? . . . There is no Protector! May he be thrice damned! Here is my hair, Baktior! Of what use is it to me? See, it is white! Ah, my heart! I shall tear out my heart and place it in your breast, my son, that you may breathe once more! . . . Wake up, Baktior! Take pity on me. I see your soul now lodged in a panther. You are a panther, Baktior. A great panther, a bold panther wandering over the mountains. But it is not at the flocks that you hurl yourself. It is at evil people, at dark and evil people. With one blow of your paw you fell the evil one. Vengeance, my son! Be relentless in your vengeance! You were kind, and this is what they did to you. I see your blood. . . . How beautiful you are, Baktior! You walk on the cliffs and the cliffs rejoice in your beauty. And the heavens rejoice. You can do anything you wish, Baktior. You are filled with strength and power, while light streams from your eyes like fire in the night. . . . Here is some more hair—see, it is white, and some more. I tear it out for you and it does not hurt me, my son: for you, all for you, only

you. . . . So that you will wake up. . . . Wake up, and we shall go home, Baktior. . . . There your beloved is waiting for you. Nisso is waiting for you. She loves you. . . . Ai, ai, ai! . . . I am your Naná who has come to wake you up. . . . Ah, woe, woe, woe! He does not breathe! They have killed him. They have killed him with bullets! I shall gouge out their eyes and cut out their hearts and trample them in the dust and spit in their eyes, in their accursed, plague-stricken eyes! . . . Wake up! Nisso is waiting for you! Perhaps you do not yet know that the Red soldiers came and rescued her? She is alive. You love her. . . . No, no, no, you are also alive, but wounded. Get up and we shall go. Get up, my son!"

Gulriz now bent over her son, now drew back, tenderly running her fingers over Baktior's dead face, quieting down only to rouse sharply to her misery once more, talking on and on so that Zuaida could no longer bear to listen from where she huddled on a rock with the tears streaming down her face. Hudodod bit his lips till the blood ran down as he pressed his brow against the sweaty neck of his horse. But when at last Zuaida gave vent to her despair in a sharp, irrepressible cry, Gulriz suddenly straightened up. She gently lowered Baktior on the linen and turned to Zuaida.

"Do not cry out, Zuaida," she said in simple, distinct tones as she wrung her hands. "He is dead. My son is dead. My son is no more. My son. . . ."

Zuaida jumped up and ran over to Gulriz and the sobs of the two women merged into one. This was too much for Hudodod, who with a hopeless gesture also broke into sobs.

The sound of hoof beats came from the distance: the Red Army men were returning. Suddenly Hudodod became aware of his surroundings and looked about until his eyes fell on the prisoner sitting at the edge of the trail. In a burst of fury he sprang toward him, whipped out his sabre and swung it with all his strength. The man's head rolled to the edge of the trail and disappeared over the precipice.

Immediately the women became silent. From behind the cliff rode Taran at an easy trot. Before he reached them Gulriz rushed over to Hudodod and threw her arms around his neck, a dark fire gleaming in her eyes.

"I shall be a son to you, Naná," cried Hudodod. "I shall be like Baktior."

There where she lay limp in the arms of Hudodod, Gulriz pressed her wrinkled face to his hot, moist cheek.

4

When Sho-Pir had completely recovered consciousness, he and Shvetsov tried to comprehend all that had taken place in Siatang during the last few days and to determine the extent of the damage. With this clear, they could plan what had to be done.

The basmachi had been completely defeated. Fifty-six of them had been captured and locked up in the fortress where they were being guarded by Red Army men. Azizkhon, Zogar, the khalifa and several sayids and mirs were imprisoned in the old tower, from where they would be summoned in proper time in order to give detailed evidence as to the cause of their raid on Siatang. It was impossible to cross-examine them until Sho-Pir was in condition to be present, for he was the only one who knew their language, a language which differed only slightly from that spoken in Siatang. At present Sho-Pir's state was much too serious to permit of his holding any serious conversations at all. Maximov insisted on being present even during Sho-Pir's talks with Shvetsov and Hudodod. The broken arm did not worry the doctor, but the shoulder wound proved dangerous. In leaving his body, the bullet had apparently touched his lungs, and there was danger of complications. Sho-Pir was so weak from loss of blood that he still suffered spells of unconsciousness. Maximov ordered his bed to be removed to the schoolhouse, where he lay alone in one of the small rooms.

But Maximov could not prevent Sho-Pir from taking an interest in events and having his own opinion about them. The sick man became nervous and upset if decisions were made without his participation. In spite of the doctor's protests, Sho-Pir's bed became the centre about which the life in this small community revolved. He insisted on knowing everything, and nothing was concealed from him.

Sixteen canyon-men had been killed in addition to Mariam and Baktior. Among them were three children. One little boy had been trampled underfoot by a horse, another had been choked to death by the basmachi, while the body of Issof's little niece was found with the head bashed in and her body bearing the marks of raping.

No traces could be found of the six women who had been taken away to Yakhbar. Ali-Mamat's daughter Nafiz, who had studied along with Nisso, was one of these women.

The bodies of thirty-nine basmachi who had been killed in the fighting were found in the canyon and the village. Among them was the ressalidar. No one could estimate how many more had perished in the river. It was the opinion of Shvetsov and Sho-Pir that no more than fifteen or twenty could have escaped. Forty-three abandoned rifles were found. Sho-Pir and Shvetsov could determine how many weapons the basmachi had possessed altogether only after the cross-examination.

Two Red Army men had been killed, and two wounded, one of them seriously.

Almost all of the grain had been used by the basmachi or burned by the merchant just before Kendiry killed him. But most of the goods brought by the caravan was found, though much had been torn, spoiled, and broken.

Karashir headed a voluntary detachment of faqirs who searched the valley and gorges for hidden loot which they brought to Nisso's old room.

Little damage had been done to the stone huts of the canyon-men, but almost the entire autumn supply of straw and clover had been burnt up. The old canal was destroyed. Half the cattle had been killed. There was no grain to sow. The threat of famine hung over the village.

On the second day after the band had been wiped out, Shvetsov sent Taran and four Red Army men to the Volost with the request that the Party organization take immediate measures to supply Siatang with fodder, food products, and grain for sowing.

In his report to the commander of the garrison Shvetsov spoke of the necessity of having a permanent Red Army post in Siatang and asked that some twenty-five soldiers from the Eastern post be sent to escort the captive basmachi

to whatever point he saw fit to send them. Shvetsov also sent a note to the secretary of the Volost Party Bureau asking him to come to Siatang.

Taran set out.

Day and night the sound of weeping was heard in Siatang. In every house the people moaned and shouted and cursed the basmachi and bewailed their fate. Even the former followers of the Preordained demanded vengeance on the basmachi imprisoned in the fortress. Ignoring all expostulations, the canyon-men made rich soups and plov for the Red Army men and presented them with little gifts—bright woolen stockings, tubeteikas, bouquets of wild flowers and sprays of apricot blossoms. But Shvetsov was firm in prohibiting the slaughter of cattle and ordered the canyon-men to get their implements ready for ploughing. Those of the Red Army men who were not on duty went from house to house helping the canyon-men repair their ploughs. Each soldier was sure to be followed by a train of inquisitive children, the smallest of whom was likely to be riding on his husky shoulders.

The village affairs were ably supervised by Hudodod, who appealed to Sho-Pir for advice several times a day.

The funeral of Baktior, Mariam, Deikin, two Red Army men and all the dead canyon-men was held on the third day after the fighting. Nisso and Gulriz, Shvetsov and all his free Red Army men as well as the entire population of Siatang were present at the solemn ceremony out on the wastelands. A great funeral mound was raised beside the common grave on the top of which the Red Army men had built a wooden pyramid painted red. On one side of this pyramid Shvetsov had written an inscription composed by Sho-Pir in Russian, while on the opposite side Hudodod had written the same text in Siatang. At night Gulriz stole out to the grave and placed some sugar beside it so that the soul of Baktior would not suffer from lack of sweets until it became reincarnated in the body of a panther.

The old but sturdy heart of Gulriz withstood this great ordeal. From morning to night the women of the village stood at the threshold of her home. Zuaida went to live with her temporarily, and both she and Nisso slept alongside of the old woman.

Gulriz scarcely slept at night and frequently moaned, at which times Nisso would press close to her and gently stroke her arms and shoulders without taking her large, sympathetic eyes off the old woman's face. Nisso was unable to utter words of consolation, but Gulriz was ever conscious of her affectionate attention.

5

Nisso's figure was shown off to good advantage by the simple cotton dress such as is worn by Russian women. But she refused to wear the canvas sport shoes which were presented to her, preferring to go barefoot.

"If it were not for her natural thinness," thought Maximov as he looked at Nisso, "that girl would, would. . . ." but he failed to find the appropriate words.

However, Maximov was less interested in Nisso's appearance than in her mental state. So deeply had she been shocked by recent events that during the first few days she was completely indifferent to everything around her. For hours at a time she would sit listlessly in the hospital room or on the porch oblivious of everything and everyone. At such times she seemed not to be living at all, but to be sunk in a state of lethargy during which she contemplated a vision seen by her alone. Had Maximov understood Siatang he would have been even more worried. During the brief moments when her mind became lucid and she seemed to approach a normal state, her speech would be interrupted by words bearing no relationship to the thought she was trying to express. Day and night she was haunted by the dreadful image of the mutilated body of Mariam swinging from the gallows. She could not get rid of it however she tried by closing her eyes or focusing them on the green, sun-bright leaves of the orchard. This kept her in a constant state of fright. If by a supreme effort of will she drove her thoughts off Mariam, they immediately turned to Baktior who seemed both alive and dead. She remembered his every gesture, every expression of his eyes, every intonation of the words spoken to her in the darkness of the evening, so full of hope and longing. And she was filled with sharp, bitter pity for him. She was ashamed of not having loved him. It seemed

to her that she was to blame for this. Nisso felt that if Baktior had not loved her so deeply he would never have thrown himself on Aziz-khon and would probably have remained alive. At this point her thoughts would reach such a state of turmoil that she would clasp her head and sit rocking back and forth until someone would rouse her by calling her name. . . . Old Gulriz would sit down next to her with her arms about her shoulders, and the two of them would remain together silent and motionless.

Maximov could do nothing to cure her mental state; he knew that only time would heal. But he tried to distract her by giving her all sorts of jobs to perform. Nisso never refused to do anything. She looked after the sick and wounded, brought water from the spring, washed the linen and the dishes, prepared the food, milked the cow, and went down to the village for extra milk.

Only in the presence of Sho-Pir did she become animated; then she talked freely and easily. Sho-Pir asked her about everything going on in the village, so that in spite of herself she was forced to take an interest in events. She would sit on a stool next to his bed and report everything she knew. One day she returned from the village accompanied by Kendiry.

"He is a very kind man," she said to Sho-Pir. "He wants to see you."

Vague, seemingly unfounded suspicions strengthened the hostility Sho-Pir had always felt toward Kendiry. He could not help wondering how the basmachi had been so well informed as to the layout of the village, the whereabouts of Nisso and the schedule of the caravan. It could not have been mere chance that they had fallen on the caravan at that narrow point along the trail. From whom did Aziz-khon get his information? To be sure, much of it had been supplied by the merchant Mirso-Hur, but there were things the latter could not have known. Kendiry was the last person to have come to Siatang from Yakhbar. And Sho-Pir found it strange that Kendiry should have been in such close contact with the basmachi while they were in the fortress.

"Very well, Nisso. But you go out. I wish to speak to him alone."

Nisso left. As Kendiry entered the room he bowed deeply

and thought to himself, "Looks up and coming. Too bad. Probably pull through." Then he straightened up and said, "Praised be the Protector! I see you are better, Sho-Pir. In the blackness of the storm, the lightning will illumine the path of the brave! You defended yourself gallantly, Sho-Pir. You alone sent nineteen wolves to their death! I have been told of this. It is our great happiness that you have remained alive."

"I shall pull through all right now," replied Sho-Pir, too weak to lift his head from the pillow.

"How pale you are! You must have lost much blood."

"Tell me this, Kendiry—here, sit down next to me on this stool—that's right. Why was Aziz-khon not afraid that you would kill him?"

Kendiry's cold eyes narrowed slightly as he thought to himself, "Hm, wants to cross-examine me. Well, let him try."

"I said to Aziz-khon, 'curses on the unfaithful; you have brought us happiness, Khan; Soviet power has come to an end, praised be the Protector!' I am very sly. If you offer meat to a dog, he will not bite your hand."

Interpret that however you wish! Sho-Pir knew that his delay in replying to Kendiry's words could be justified by his weakness.

"Very well," he said at last. "But if the basmachi had remained here, would you have continued to feed them that kind of 'meat'?"

"I knew you would come, Sho-Pir," replied Kendiry firmly. "And I knew the Red soldiers would come. I sent a man to tell you. Could it have turned out otherwise?" (A move with my Knight!)

"What if the man had not reached the Volost?" (True enough, Nisso said that he had sent the man with the message.)

"I first met Shir-Mamat in the village of Chorka near the border of Yakhbar. I have met many people in my life and I can read their hearts in their eyes. Shir-Mamat is a man to be trusted." (I wonder whether he has been arrested.) "I knew he could be trusted to lead the detachment here, was I not right?"

"Possibly."

"If I had not thought so, I myself would have hurried to the Volost."

Both men were silent. Kendiry took a snowdrop from under his tubeteika, carefully smoothed the petals and stuck it in a crack at the head of Sho-Pir's bed.

"How did you manage to take Nisso out of the tower and hide her in the grain pit while the basmachi were still here? And who was the man who helped you?"

Kendiry answered frankly and surely, without avoiding Sho-Pir's gaze.

"The basmachi were all asleep. I said to myself, 'The Red soldiers must be on the way and will soon reach here. Sho-Pir will also come.'" (I certainly had no doubt of that. But only Talleyrand could have foreseen that the whole bunch of you would not be wiped out!) "I said to myself, 'Nisso must be saved; Sho-Pir is fond of her: she is to marry Baktior.' Everyone was asleep at that time, and I thought that if I did not save her, nobody would. I do not know who the man who helped me was. He was a basmach. I had eight coins. I also had my razor. I gave him his choice of the coins or the razor. He chose the coins."

"Where is he now?"

(I myself would like to know whether Bkhara is still up in the mountains or has already gone to report my fiasco.) "I do not know, Sho-Pir," replied Kendiry, stifling a yawn. "Probably got killed in the fight."

"What if anyone had awakened during that time?"

"Ah, worthy one!" (There is no denying I took a great risk, but it was worth it.) "Why do you ask? I should now be lying next to Baktior. For a hundred years they would have remembered my name and said, 'He was not a bad sort; at least he was no coward.' Perhaps my soul would now be soaring in the body of an eagle. I took many chances. Would not the merchant have killed me if I had not stolen that little gun?" (Better to anticipate this question.)

(Too bad he killed them; we could make use of them now.)

"I saw the great burning," continued Kendiry. "The merchant took the advice of Nauruz-bek and plucked the very heart out of the canyon-men. The blood rushed to my

head. I did very well to kill the dog." (If you ever found out who actually incited them to burn the grain!)

(What if they are really his enemies and he is hotheaded. . . ? In his place perhaps I too. . . .) Sho-Pir's attitude towards Kendiry softened. "Tell me, Kendiry, at the moment when. . . ."

But here the door burst open and Maximov entered the room.

"What do you call this?" he roared. "A fine thing this is! You will please be good enough to get out of here, my man!"

"He does not understand Russian," said Sho-Pir.

Kendiry had all he could do to suppress a Russian oath. (Who are you to be putting me out, Aesculapius?) As though in answer to his thoughts, Maximov reached toward him.

"He'll understand all right!" he said as he led Kendiry to the door. "As for you, whom did I give you permission to see? Only Shvetsov, the old woman, Nisso, and that other—what's his name? Hudodar."

"Hudodod," corrected Sho-Pir with a wan smile.

"Makes no difference. And no one else! Here you are with a fine case of pleurisy beginning and all sorts of complications setting in and you—phoo! If you don't improve your discipline I shall have to put you under lock and key in solitary confinement. And no back-talk! if you please! But seriously," he added in a changed tone as he bent over Sho-Pir, "how do you feel? Weak, eh?"

"This damned weakness," murmured Sho-Pir, closing his eyes.

"I thought so. And you go making trouble for yourself! Here, take this," and Maximov held some drops to Sho-Pir's bloodless lips.

Nisso wished to see Sho-Pir, but the doctor would not admit her this time. She went into the larger room and sat down beside Fish Bones, who was covered with plasters and bandages and still very weak. They had beaten her so brutally that Maximov ordered at least ten days in bed. With her hair bound up in a white kerchief and wearing the man's shirt that Maximov had selected for her from the goods brought by the caravan, Fish Bones looked as

thin and worn as though she had come through a long and serious illness.

"Tell Sho-Pir to ask the Russian doctor to let me go, Nisso," she said. "I cannot lie here any more."

"Why not, Fish Bones?"

"My children—where are my children?"

"They are at home as you know. Is Karashir such a bad father?"

"You understand nothing, Nisso. Karashir is as important as a Khan these days, what with his rifle and his authority. He will not give a thought to the children."

Nisso feared that Fish Bones might be right. Without a word as to where she was going, she got up and went out into the orchard, crossed through the camp of the Red Army men and went down to the village to Karashir's house where she found the children alone and the house sadly neglected. After hugging each of the children in turn, Nisso had a look about the miserable house and yard and decided that a home without a woman in it was a poor place indeed. With unexpected energy she set to work.

When Karashir returned that evening from an armed expedition into the mountains, he did not recognize his home: everything had been put in order, the dishes (including a new teakettle and some drinking bowls) had been washed and neatly piled on the stone ledge for this purpose. Two zinc pails which he had never seen before stood filled with water and covered with slabs of slate. The hearth was still glowing and giving off a cosy warmth. The little iron pot on the hearth was filled with boiled rice. On the bunk in the corner slept the children covered by a new quilt, and when Karashir lifted up a corner to get a look into their faces, he was surprised by their unwonted cleanliness.

In wonder and amazement Karashir went out into the yard and saw that it too had been swept.

"I always said I had a good dev," he thought with an abashed smile. "Only this is no dev, but a woman. It would be good to have a wife like this. She probably would not shout at me like Fish Bones."

He began to think how all his life he had dreamed of being rich enough to have a clean house!

He returned to his sleeping children and swung the rifle off his shoulder, unbuckled the cartridge belt holding in the robe from which he had hacked off the bottom, and unwound his turban, a recent addition to his attire. Finally he sat down by the hearth and stuffed his mouth with boiled rice, which he sat chewing in ecstasy.

For the first time since the coming of the basmachi, Nisso saw no frightful visions that night as she lay down exhausted beside the sleepless Gulriz. In her sleep she reached out to embrace the old woman without feeling the warm tears slipping down the latter's wrinkled cheeks.

The next morning Gulriz noticed that Nisso's eyes, which in the course of a few days had assumed the expression of a mature woman, were once more fresh and clear, though still very sad.

6

Twelve days after the wiping out of the basmachi, workers from the Volost came to the village of Siatang. They said that news of the tragedy had spread throughout all the gorges and canyons of the High Mountains and that the inhabitants of even the smallest and most distant settlements were sending help in the form of food, fodder, and grain for sowing. Everything they brought to the Volost would be immediately forwarded to Siatang. Thus the faqirs isolated in this wild canyon discovered the existence of many unknown friends.

"Are you responsible for this?" Sho-Pir asked Gigo Gvetadze, Secretary of the Volost Party Bureau and the only representative from the Volost whom Maximov admitted to the sick man's room.

During the last few days, the state of Sho-Pir's health had grown worse; the complications Maximov had feared had set in.

The tall, thin-faced Georgian in the long coat of a cavalryman sat so straight on the stool next to Sho-Pir's bed that it seemed he was incapable of bending. His voice was soft and smooth and he spoke Russian with a marked accent. He had come to the Volost the previous year, crossing the then unfamiliar High Mountains all alone. Now Sho-Pir

was meeting him for the first time, for Gvetadze had been visiting the villages along the upper reaches of the Great River when Sho-Pir had come to the Volost to meet the caravan.

"I had only to mention what happened," replied Gvetadze.

"Thanks."

"No thanks due. If a similar thing had happened at the Volost, wouldn't your people here in Siatang have helped us?"

"A lot of help we could have offered," said Sho-Pir ruefully. "But now, of course . . . if only we recover from this setback. . . ." Then he added impatiently as he imagined all the work waiting to be done: "But this is a streak of bad luck. Me lolling here at the very moment I am most needed!"

"Don't worry, Comrade Medvedev, or Sho-Pir as these people call you. We'll have to manage without you. You've done your job; now you must rest and get well. We'd like to send you away, but the doctor says you mustn't be moved for the present. So you just keep on lying here until you are back in shape. Then we'll ship you off to a sanatorium wherever you like—in the Crimea or the Caucasus where I come from. The fact is my brother is manager of a sanatorium in Teberde, a wonderful place up in the mountains. He'd take you in as an honoured guest."

"What are you thinking about, Comrade Gvetadze?" said Sho-Pir with a smile. "What talk can there be of a sanatorium in the Caucasus? With all there is to be done. . . . As for resting—well, I'm resting. . . ."

"All right, all right. Why argue about it? We'll simply give you a Party assignment to go to a health resort."

"I'm not a Party member."

"You mean you have no Party card. But you will have."

"Why do you say that?" asked Sho-Pir in some agitation, raising his head from the pillow.

"Lie quiet or I shall leave. Can you use your right hand?"

"Yes," said Sho-Pir, missing the point of the question but taking his wasted hand out from under the covers to show that he could use it.

"Then tomorrow you must write an application for Party membership. I'll take it with me when I go back to the Volost."

"How do you know what sort of person I am?"

"I know all right. The whole Party Bureau knows."

"You have never seen my work here."

"That's true, but we have heard plenty about it. That's why we never sent anyone to Siatang. Since we were short of people we sent them to other places. Things were going smoothly in Siatang."

"Until we got this shake-up. It turns out that I am to blame."

"Nonsense! You had nothing to do with it. Your work here in Siatang was an example for any Bolshevik. We figured that you needed help in the educational field, so we sent you a teacher. When we got richer we sent a caravan, a fellow to open a cooperative store, and a doctor. If you've had trouble—well, we'll make up for it. Do you think you're the only non-Party man doing such work? Up in Ravil-Sang at the head of the Great River there's a young Ukrainian carpenter named Golovan. In Shashdar we have the Tatar Kasimov, also a former Red Army man who came here after you. We don't consider these people non-Party men any more than we do you."

"In other words I—I—"

"Getting excited? That's forbidden. I'll have to call the doctor and leave. In general, Comrade Medvedev, Party orders are to lie quiet and get well. That's your only job at present. As for your Siatang—the Party organization is devoting all its attention to Siatang at present. Formerly that was difficult; now events themselves have forced us to concentrate on Siatang. We plan to set up a Red Army post here in the future. And start a Komsomol organization. You'll have a reading room, a cooperative store and a dispensary, and you'll get a new teacher. In general, we'll help Siatang catch up with the settlements that have made most progress. And we'll do all this without your aid, because you must lie still for the present. But you'll be our consultant, if you don't object."

Sho-Pir kept looking raptly at the ceiling, as though visualizing all that Gvetadze promised.

"We've been wanting to do all this for a long time," went on Gvetadze, "but the mountains were in the way. In the autumn some more people will arrive. We have great plans. Comrade Stalin himself is taking a personal interest in our work. Shall I go on telling you about it or are you tired?"

As he lay there engrossed in his own thoughts, Sho-Pir was conscious only of the smooth, gentle voice of Gvetadze. His accent and intonation were like some exotic melody. It seemed as though from far away came the murmur of a stream and the whispering of leaves as the breeze swayed the branches. As he looked up into the trees, Sho-Pir saw a bit of blue sky with a black storm cloud far off on the horizon. Flashes of lightning played in its dark masses as it kept retreating further and further away. Here near the stream and the trees the air was so light and fresh that it went to Sho-Pir's head. He was content and knew that this was happiness—a bright, unknown happiness like music.

Suddenly Gvetadze stopped and glanced at Sho-Pir. The sick man's eyes were closed.

Gvetadze was alarmed and reached out to feel his pulse.

"Did too much talking," thought Gvetadze in some vexation. "But his pulse is good. Simply fallen asleep."

Quietly Gvetadze got up and tiptoed out of the room.

"Mustn't let him be in at the cross-examination," he decided as he tried to keep the door from squeaking. "Very weak. We'll manage somehow. Have to take good care of him . . . pure gold. . . ."

7

For nearly three months they fought to save Sho-Pir's life. The complications assumed a very severe form. During all those three months Maximov remained at Sho-Pir's bedside, so that he himself became gaunt and thin.

Gvetadze sent a messenger with a letter to be delivered beyond the limits of the Great Mountains. The messenger galloped day and night, changing horses at set intervals, cutting across the deserted spaces of the Eastern Valleys. The letter contained a request to send a lung specialist with necessary medicines. No other measures could be taken. Had it

been possible for an aeroplane to make a landing in Siatang or the Volost, Gvetadze would have demanded such aid. But the building of an airdrome was planned only for the following year. Nor was there yet a broadcasting station in Siatang. The poles which were to bring telegraph communication strode over only the first hundred kilometres of the route to the High Mountains. All hope was placed in the natural vitality of Sho-Pir's constitution, but it was torture to watch his struggle with death.

During those three months the people of Siatang revealed a devotion to Sho-Pir the extent of which he himself could never have guessed. Not a day passed but the canyon-men gathered at the home of Gulriz to ask Maximov about Sho-Pir's health. One day Karashir and Issof came to Maximov and said that they were ready to carry the sick man on a stretcher over the mountains for a month, two months—as long as necessary to take him to a real hospital in a "large city." They swore to carry him so carefully that "the wind will not touch him, his sleep will remain undisturbed, and if we should place a bowl filled with water on his chest, not a drop would spill." But Sho-Pir's condition required that he remain where he was.

Day and night Nisso sat at Sho-Pir's bed alongside of Maximov. She was in such a nervous state that the slightest change in his condition threw her into ecstasy or despair. She lived as though consumed by slow fire. In time she became an invaluable bedside attendant and took Maximov's place whenever he fell asleep from exhaustion on the bed standing next to Sho-Pir's. If in her ignorance and the exaggeration of her fancy Sho-Pir had formerly seemed to Nisso to be a person great and mysterious, now when he lay sick and weak surrounded by other Russians like himself, and all the mystery had disappeared, he became for her a simple human being who was painfully, incalculably dear, a being who was her very own and one in whom she placed all her hope. With all the strength of her first great love she believed that she would save him from death, and that when he recovered he would never leave her. She revealed sources of energy that amazed Maximov. During the three months that she sat by Sho-Pir's bed Nisso devoted herself to learning Russian. At the same time Maximov

studied Siatang, which was comparatively simple and primitive. Yet his success could not be compared with Nisso's. She began to read Russian books, and became the official interpreter for the canyon-men and the Red Army men. That summer the Komsomol organization at the Red Army post accepted Hudodod into membership, a fact which was a bitter disappointment to Nisso who had hoped to be the first member from Siatang.

Many things happened in Siatang during those three months. Gradually the people forgot about the catastrophe which had taken place in the spring. The captive basmachi were dispatched in small groups to the Volost. After preliminary investigations Aziz-khon and his supporters were also led away. Shvetsov, Gvetadze and the commander of the garrison decided to send them on to the nearest town beyond the High Mountains. The evidence gained from the leaders of the band was very indefinite and contradictory. Aziz-khon said nothing. It was clear that the basmachi organization had ties in distant places and that some strong hand had manipulated the operations of the Yakhbarian Khan. Aziz-khon's brief explanation of the "love motive" behind his action was accepted as a means of shielding himself from more serious accusations. Sho-Pir's suspicions that Kendiry had aided the band were not substantiated by the evidence gathered in cross-examinations, and Kendiry was allowed to go free. For some time he remained in Siatang, but later went to the Volost to continue his work as a barber in a more lucrative place. The closest observation of his behaviour brought no results. He kept ever to himself and apparently had no other interest in life than the shaving of beards and the earning of small change by slight services.

All that summer the Red Army men actively participated in the life of the village. They restored the canal and helped the canyon-men plough, sow and irrigate their fields. The Russians planted truck gardens alongside the Red Army barracks at the entrance to the canyon on the far side of the wastelands, and the local inhabitants came to stare at potatoes, cucumbers, cabbages and beets which they had never seen before.

Gulriz was elected Chairman of the Village Soviet, and she drowned her grief in work. Not a day passed but she

was to be seen in some home in the village, where she conducted herself like the head of the family—its eldest member who took charge of every aspect of its life, offering advice and taking an interest in the most trifling needs.

Everyone now called Karashir head of the Siatang militia. He strutted about the village in Russian boots, Red Army pants and shirt and a cap with a red star on it, lamenting the fact that he did not have the blue insignia which were sewn to the uniforms of regular Red Army men. In the yard of his house stood the pedigreed horse which had belonged to the *ressaldar*. The inside of his house was now furnished with a table, a cupboard, and three stools such as the Russians used. He had received these things from the Red Army men who in their spare time went in for carpentering, tinkering, and other trades. *Issof*, who now held all the traditions of the *Preordained* in utter contempt, was a permanent guest at Karashir's house. He would come with his wife *Saukh-Bogor*, whom he no longer beat or scolded.

So much food had been brought from the *Volost* that there was no need to stint, and the canyon-men often invited friends to their homes. In the evening the Siatang young people and the Red Army men would gather in the yard of the fortress. The Russian accordion which at first seemed strange to the people of Siatang proved to harmonize very well with the local *tambourines*, *lutes* and *flutes*. *Hudodod* was official conductor, and his sister *Zuaida* always began the first song. *Nisso* was the only one who could not be coaxed into joining the young people in the evening. She was in a constant state of alarm when away from home. She preferred sitting at the bedside of *Sho-Pir* with a book borrowed from the Red Army men, reading until dark.

The canyon-men eagerly awaited the arrival of the new people who were to come to Siatang. Every innovation was now welcome, for Soviet power had become firmly established, and was loved and understood by the inhabitants.

Late in the autumn the second half of the great Soviet caravan arrived at the Volost, this time without delay. It brought the new workers, among whom was a doctor. But by this time Sho-Pir was out of danger; his powerful constitution had stood the test. Soon he began to walk about.

One day Shvetsov returned from the Volost with a sheet of a translation of a newspaper clipping which he handed to Sho-Pir.

"Have a look at this. It is about us."

"Our correspondent has just informed us of an outrageous incident in Yakhbar which serves as a glaring illustration of the situation on the Russian border," read Sho-Pir. "The wife of the respected Aziz-khon, ruler of the khanate, was abducted by Russian Bolsheviks for political reasons and taken away to Siatang. The unhappy husband went there accompanied by his relatives to request the release of his wife. The local inhabitants unanimously supported him, and even went so far as to cause an uprising when Bolshevik officials insolently refused to grant the Khan's request. The Bolsheviks resorted to brutal means of putting down the uprising. They threw the innocent Aziz-khon into prison and killed his relatives, along with a large number of unarmed inhabitants. The unhappy wife of Aziz-khon remains in Siatang to this very day. She is kept in the house of the Bolshevik commissar Medvedev, who makes her wear Russian clothes and has forced her to become a member of the Komsomol. One cannot help being amazed at the tolerance and heedlessness displayed by the Most Powerful of Potentates in signing a treaty of friendship with Red Russia at the very moment when the Bolsheviks have shot down these defenceless Yakhbarians who are his subjects..."

"Hey, what is this?" asked Sho-Pir, raising his eyes from the paper.

"Nothing special," laughed Shvetsov deprecatingly. "A foreigner's idea of a joke. One of the papers happened to slip over the border and we had it translated into Russian."

"It is simply funny."

"Funny all right. But when that type of 'literary material' lands in one of the European capitals and is used as a

document explaining the so-called 'border incidents,' and when respected diplomats with double chins use such documents to sling mud at our foreign policy, they cease to be so funny."

"The only word of truth in the whole thing is that Nisso lives in my house and wears Russian clothes. But who could have informed them of that? Before the coming of the bas-machi she dressed like a native. And there was no Komsomol organization here before that either."

"Something to think about. A single word is often enough to give a person away. Our Special Service at the Volost is investigating the matter now. We can rely on it to discover any 'ardent defender of justice and humanity' we may be harbouring. What do you think?"

"This is what I think, Shvetsov," replied Sho-Pir seriously. "If we are slow in catching such a person, he will duck out of sight. He will wriggle his way into one of our cities and even into some responsible position. Of course we shall catch him in the long run, but he can do a lot of harm in the meantime. We still have a lot to learn; evidently their machinery works well and it will take the skill of a watch-maker to figure it out. The most important thing is to close our borders and close them tight."

"As far as our borders are concerned—. But I have no right to tell even you about that. If you stay here until next year you will find out everything for yourself."





EPILOGUE

“**S**HALL we call a halt?” asked Sho-Pir. “We have come to the Pass.”

“Yes, let’s,” answered Nisso, dropping her reins on the saddle.

The tired horses stood panting alongside of each other as they glanced back at the climb they had just made. Nisso pushed back her fur cap and adjusted her hair. Below stretched a barren, primeval world consisting of the elongated cup of the valley excavated by glaciers thousands of years before, and row after row of mountains, smooth at the base, pointed at the summit. They were lighted by the sun, but dissolved to violet mist in the transparency of space.

“Button up your sheepskin,” said Sho-Pir. “There is a wind.”

“I love such wind, Sho-Pir. Look down there. Are they not like mice?”

“What?”

“The mountains below. As though they had lined up their noses and were nibbling at the valley. How tiny they are! And the snow peaks up above are like the beards of enormous old men. How they shine! They are just like people.”

“You like to make things up, Nisso,” smiled Sho-Pir as he shifted his rifle from one shoulder to another. Then he turned heavily in the saddle and leaned on one stirrup so that he could thrust his fingers under the saddle-girth about the animal’s wet belly to test its tautness. “Not a soul within a radius of two hundred kilometres,” he said as he straightened up.

“How much further have we to go, Sho-Pir?”

“Another two weeks of riding,” he replied thoughtfully. “We have been on the road for three weeks already. Are you sick of it?”

"I could never become sick of it," said Nisso. "Look! Just look! Like a shattered red mirror over there, but still flaming with colour."

"The cliffs throwing back the sunset. Those rocks are called the moraine."

"How long will it take you to come back in the automobile?"

"If the road is ready by that time, I shall drive you back in three days. Can you imagine what it will be like?"

Nisso fell silent. She did not wish to imagine what it would be like. In the bottom of her heart she had long since told herself that there was no reason why she should ever come back. She had not left Siatang only to return. Not even in an automobile. To be sure, Sho-Pir had a different idea. He had left Siatang only because he had heard of the building of the new road—of course he would have to be the first to drive a machine over it! He was, after all, a professional driver. All winter he had impatiently awaited the opening up of the Pass. Nisso had also been impatient, and now here she was, riding at last into the great world. Only two more weeks. They had only to cross those mountains, and those, and those others, and those which were like ghosts, scarcely visible in the distance. Then she would see all of which she had dreamed for so long a time—cities, big cities, and big people. Moscow!

"Maybe I myself will some day become a big person," thought Nisso. "After all, I am no longer living in Yakhbar. When we reached the Pass Sho-Pir said, 'Look back at those peaks—the countries beyond them are just like Yakhbar, in which you had no chance to live like a human being. How many Yakhbarians still exist out there, beyond the borders of our Soviet land! And now look ahead: all roads open to you!' Why should I not become a big person? I want to so badly! How lucky I am! What is there to stop me?"

"What are you dreaming about, Nisso?"

She turned quickly to Sho-Pir, so that their knees touched. Sho-Pir's horse placed its head on the mane of Nisso's shaggy little pony, nosing into its hair.

"Give me your hand, Sho-Pir." Nisso clasped his great palm in her little ones and pressed it impulsively before letting go. "I was not dreaming about anything. Let's go on now."

They moved on down the Pass.

The incalculable spaces of the Eastern Valleys in no way resembled the deep rocky canyons of Siatang, now left far behind. Every evening for three weeks Sho-Pir and Nisso had selected a grassy stretch at the foot of some mountain from which a spring bubbled. They had hobbled their horses and let them graze while they went to gather brush for a fire. They had slept on felt mats and covered themselves with quilts without taking off their sheepskins. At dawn they had saddled their horses and continued on the r way. During all those three weeks only once had they come across a camp of nomads, on the occasion of which they had spent the night in a yurt. They had drunk rich yaks' milk and kumiss, and all night long had sat talking with the nomads who crowded into the tent. The latter were interested in the great things happening beyond the High Mountains. They wanted to know about the collective farms of which other nomads had brought them word; about the new road reaching out to them from the big cities; about the flying machines which had recently passed over their camp.

But Sho-Pir and Nisso themselves knew nothing. They were riding to learn news and not to bring it. They had been quite worn out by the nomads' curiosity that night.

The deserted road seemed endless. The only live creatures they met were the bold little marmots sitting up on their hind legs at the entrance to their holes to watch them pass.

As Nisso and Sho-Pir descended the Pass the sunset grew more intense, and the black peaks segmented its light so that it fell on the opposite cliffs like red columns. Here at last was a spring and green grass. A good place to spend the night.

Suddenly a horseman appeared from behind a cliff. He was followed by a second and a third.

Sho-Pir and Nisso stopped and shaded their eyes with their hands to try to make out who these unexpected riders could be. The newcomers also stopped to look, then came galloping forward with their rifles held across their saddles.

"They are Red Army men, Sho-Pir! Where could they have come from?"

"Hello! Greetings on the road! Where are you coming from?" asked one of the soldiers cheerfully as he drew up alongside of them.

Sho-Pir looked into their tanned, healthy faces and at the green insignia visible at the neck of their open sheepskins.

"Border guards?" asked Sho-Pir happily as he shook hands with each of them in turn. "We are from the Volost. Have you come far? Oh, it seems there are a lot of you!" he added catching sight of a long column of horsemen emerging from behind the cliff.

"A lot? Plenty. You better wait here because there's no room to pass. So long! We are reconnoitring."

"So long!" answered Sho-Pir in chagrin as he watched the three ride off. He had hoped to have a talk with them. But he could see that a whole detachment was rounding the cliff. He and Nisso, who was no less excited than he, rode off the path onto the grass and the men at the head of the detachment waved to them as they passed.

Just as Nisso was about to return to the path, another file of cavalymen appeared. These were the commanders. There were many of them, and Sho-Pir realized that they represented the staff of the detachment. How large it must be if it boasted so many commanders!

Sho-Pir saluted, and the commanders returned his salute. One of them left the column and came over.

"Hello."

"Hello. Pleasant journey. You from the Volost?"

The commander had a pleasant face. Sho-Pir noted the diamond-shaped insignia on his collar and wondered why a detachment headed by a commander of such high rank should have been sent to the High Mountains. Sho-Pir answered the questions put to him tersely, feeling himself once more a Red Army man.

"We have come to close the border," explained the commander, allowing his men to ride ahead without him. "We are going to set up border posts to make your mountains a safe place to live in. High time these settlements had some contact with civilization. We have brought a moving-picture machine, radio equipment, a portable dynamo, a printing press, newspaper type, a library, and plenty of other things. Is this your wife?" he asked, turning to Nisso. "How do you do."

Nisso was thrown into confusion by the unexpected greeting, by the word "wife" and the smile of the commander.

How had he found out that she was Sho-Pir's wife? But she returned his hand-clasp firmly.

The commander rode off to catch up with his staff, while the soldiers kept passing them. They saw the banner of the detachment go by wrapped in a blue cover; machine guns strapped to the backs of horses, the soldiers with white handkerchiefs under their caps to protect their faces from the mountain sun; hospital stretchers lashed to two horses, their red crosses bright against the blue canvas; soldiers, soldiers, soldiers stretching out single file in an endless line.

Sho-Pir and Nisso dismounted and stood holding their horses by the bridles as they watched in silent ecstasy. The rosy light of the sunset had already faded and the shadows of evening were quickly descending, but still the soldiers kept coming. At last the line broke and the path became empty. Apparently all had passed, but from behind the cliff appeared more horsemen. No, they were not horsemen. They were women dressed in sheepskins like the soldiers. They were the wives of the commanders, which meant that the detachment had come for long—for at least a year or two. Behind the mounted women came a train of palanquins for women who could not ride horseback.

"Look, Sho-Pir! Look!" exclaimed Nisso. "Children!"

Sure enough, here were horses bearing other palanquins through the curtains of which glimpsed the lively faces of children. They were the children of border guards, youthful travellers who were delighted to be riding in such fashion.

After another short interval came a train of camels with the driver riding ahead on a donkey. To the tail of the first camel was tied a rope fastened to the nostrils of the second, and so on down the line. Sho-Pir counted them mechanically. Fifty camels. Then again a donkey with a driver on its back and then more camels with great packs on their backs and an occasional soldier on horseback driving them along. Every camel had a little brass bell around its neck, so that the air became filled with the peaceful, rhythmic ringing of the bells. The sound rose above the trail, above the grass, above the mountains, until it seemed that the very snow peaks were touched by the music. Already it was dark and the moon had come up, flooding the earth with a transparent green light which mingled and merged with the ringing of the bells.

The camels went on and on, rolling and swaying and stepping softly over the stones of the trail.

Sho-Pir stood with his arm about Nisso's shoulder, and they were oblivious of everything else as they stood watching. In the light of the moon the camels seemed to be mysterious creatures floating above the earth. Neither Nisso nor Sho-Pir had ever before seen such a sight. It was as though they themselves were floating forward along with the mountains and the moon and the clouds, past the swaying camels whose legs seemed to wave to them in greeting.

"How many of you are there?" exclaimed Sho-Pir at last, and it seemed that a voice replied from the moonlight: "Five thousand camels, five thousand. . . ."

Time moved on, the night moved on. The mysterious shadows of the camels kept floating past. Sho-Pir and Nisso had long since hobbled their horses and lain down on their felt mats. They were unconscious of the coldness of the night as they lay under their quilts, propped up on their hands silently watching the procession of camels, bewitched by the uninterrupted ringing of the bells, the cradle song of a world giving birth to vague, fantastic images. . . . They lay there unsleeping, conscious of the slow beating of their hearts, while Sho-Pir kept smoking his beloved pipe. . . .

The moon slid behind the summits of the mountains, withdrawing its green light from the rocky slopes, but the camels kept moving on and on. . . .

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